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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 19

Lunatic Festival

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson
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魔王降臨[前編]
魔王降臨[後編]
愛は強し[前編]
愛は強し[後編]
るなてく・へすてばる
スレイヤーズすぺりおぉる
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Translation

Slayers Superior

Have You Seen Our John?

The Demon King Descends [Part 1]

At first, it looked like a cluster of abandoned houses.

Under a sunset sky stained the color of blood, the ominous cries of black birds echoed, and I couldn't see a single soul among the houses or in the fields surrounding the tiny village.

My cape and my long hair caught the color of the setting sun, streaming in the wind.

The path was a small highway, little better than a mountain trail.

I had heard in the town I left after noon that if I kept going, I would reach a small village by evening—and that the potatoes grown there were incredibly delicious.

But if this place had become a ghost town for some reason, I was looking at a wasted trip followed by a night spent outdoors.

...No way... could it be... that everyone was wiped out by a plague...?

Clinging to a sliver of anxiety, I stepped into the village.

Taking a quick look, there were maybe thirty or forty houses at most. A truly tiny, tiny village.

The name, if I recalled correctly, was something like Nibbs.

"Hellooo! Is anyone here!?"

—Caw!

At the sound of my voice, a single crow took flight from a treetop.

Just as the echoes fading into the mountains vanished, a change finally occurred.

From the doorway of a house slightly further away, I felt a gaze peeking out at me.

It seemed people were here after all.

—If I make eye contact, they'll run away—

I had a feeling that would happen, so I pretended not to notice.

"I'm a traveler! ...Umm... is there anywhere I can stay!?"

"A traveler... could it be a Sorceress!? Perhaps!"

The voice came from somewhere other than where I felt the gaze.

It was a house nearby.

The person who emerged from its shadow was an old man with a white beard.

"...That's right..."

I nodded in response to his question.

"...Oh...!"

The old man let out a cry of joy and waddled over to me.

"It is certain...! You are surely one of those written of in the prophecy...!"

"...Huh?"

Ignoring my instinctive retort, the old man turned back toward the center of the village.

"Everyone! Rejoice! The prophecy is fulfilled! The village—no, the world—is saved!"

Wooooooooaaaah!

Cheers rose in response to the old man’s declaration, and villagers began to emerge from the houses that had been shut tight.

"It's her! Is it really!?"

"Oh... thank heaven, thank heaven..."

"Such a young girl...?"

While they all chattered away, some people even started worshiping me.

"...Wait, excuse me... what do you mean, 'the world'?"

"Now, now. We shall explain the circumstances over a meal together."

—And so, I followed their lead and proceeded into the village.

"...It's... it's delicious!"

Biting into a potato that had simply been boiled in consommé, I couldn't help but shout.

A hidden specialty that could only be harvested in the mountains near this village: the Ratel Potato.

The usual pattern is that "hidden specialties" aren't actually that good, but this particular one was just as the rumors said—no, it far exceeded my expectations.

The texture was fluffy and light, yet not dry at all, with an indescribable natural sweetness.

Besides boiled, they served them fried and sautéed. They weren't elaborate dishes by any means, but because the ingredients were so good, every single thing was obscenely tasty.

In a corner of the village, at the home of the white-bearded old man—the village chief—I was treated to a feast of heartfelt potato dishes.

Beside the chief were three others, likely his family: a middle-aged man, a middle-aged woman, and a young man.

"...Come to think of it, I haven't asked your name yet."

The chief finally spoke after I had moved most of the dishes on the table into my stomach.

"I'm... Lina. Lina Inverse."

"I see. A fine name. It fits one of the heroes perfectly."

His reaction was relatively normal...

.....Hero?

I furrowed my brows.

"...Um...? Just now...?"

"The world is currently—teetering on the brink of crisis—"

Ignoring my words, the chief began his tale with a distant look in his eyes.

"The village prophecy says this: *When the heart of one with great power falls into darkness, they shall transform into a Demon King and lead the world to the edge of destruction. But despair not, O people. For a swordsman and a sorceress bearing the light shall appear and drive back the deep darkness*—"

"...Right... and... don't tell me..... are you saying the Demon King has been resurrected?"

"Exactly!"

The chief pointed a finger straight at me and shouted, veins popping on his forehead.

...Give me a break...

Internally, I sighed.

It was true that monsters and demons existed in this world. But the "Demon King" was, strictly speaking, something found only in legends—at least, that was the prevailing theory known to the Sorcerer's Guild.

—However.

Incidents where some clever little thug claimed to be a famous person or a Demon King and ran wild in a small village or town happened all over the place.

Likely, this was just another one of those cases.

I had stumbled into a rather tedious situation.

Unaware of my internal gloom, the chief continued with that distant look.

"Once, in this village, there was a violent man named Jacob who boasted of his strength. He committed every atrocity imaginable—stealing pumpkins from the fields and flipping up the skirts of the village girls."

Beside the chief, the other three wore expressions of deep sorrow.

"But we did not simply let him have his way. The entire village joined forces and exhausted every strategic resource to oppose him—by whispering pointedly about him and refusing to sweep the fallen leaves in front of only his house."

That was the extent of their "strategic resources"?

"Thus, even the mighty Jacob was helpless against our coordinated attacks, and finally, three years ago, he left the village."

"In other words, the whole village bullied him out."

"Don't put it so unpleasantly! Let's say the villagers' anger exploded, or that evil yielded before justice... regardless, peace returned to the village. But that... was only for a fleeting moment. This year—he returned! Having gathered even greater power! All to take revenge on this village! Somehow, he has learned to manipulate the mystic arts!"

"...Mystic arts... what kind?"

I asked casually while sipping my after-dinner tea.

"According to those who have seen him, he produces eerie lights and creates and fires arrows of flame."

I see. It seemed he could handle spells on the level of *Lighting* or *Flare Arrow*, but even if you weren't a sorcerer, you could activate those just by reciting a memorized incantation.

He probably paid some rogue sorcerer a pile of money to learn them.

"He has now taken up a position to the west of the village and is threatening us. For his own amusement, he blocks the irrigation channels with stones and steals away the cabbages and other crops right before harvest! This is exactly as the prophecy says: '*When the heart of one with great power falls into darkness, they shall transform into a Demon King and lead the world to the edge of destruction*'! ...For now, his power is limited to threatening this village. But if he continues to

grow stronger, he will eventually cast a shadow over the world! We must defeat him before that happens!"

"...He's gaining power by eating cabbage... I feel like a 'Demon King' who's basically a glorified caterpillar would probably just die off on his own come winter if we just left him alone..."

"Do not take him lightly! According to the prophecy, to defeat him, we need both a swordsman and a sorceress bearing the light!"

"...And you're saying I'm that sorceress who will defeat the Demon King?"

"Precisely!"

"In that case, what about the other one... the swordsman bearing the light?"

"Hmph! We have already found him! It is he!"

The person the chief pointed to was one of the three family members—a young man around twenty years old.

He had black hair and was of average height and build. ...Well... he was exactly the type of young man you could find anywhere.

Naturally, he didn't look like a swordsman or a hero in the slightest.

"I'm Mosel. Nice to meet you, Lina-san."

"...Your grandson?"

"No. He's the kid from next door. His father is a skilled lamp-maker! In other words, one who bears the light!"

"Hold it right there!"

"...Is there a problem?"

"...More like, I want to know if there's any part of this that *isn't* a problem... He's not even a swordsman! For starters!"

"Worry not! Previously, during a one-day trial enrollment at a sword school in a large town, he was praised for having 'good instincts'! In other words, he has plenty of talent!"

"...Uh-huh..."

I'm pretty sure that was just flattery to attract customers... but even if I said it, it wouldn't get through to this chief.

"Now, since you're convinced, I ask you once more. What do you say? Will you punish the Demon King alongside him?"

Taking my silence for agreement, the chief spoke.

No matter how I looked at it, this didn't seem like a profitable job. I didn't think people in such a tiny village had heaps of gold stashed away.

However.

If I refused here and they said, "Then we have no obligation to house someone so heartless," I'd be in trouble. There probably wasn't an inn in this village, and it was too late to go to another town. Of course, camping out in the freezing mountains was out of the question.

In that case, it might be best to accept for now, crush this so-called Demon King first thing tomorrow morning, and take a generous amount of those famous potatoes as my reward.

"—Fine. In exchange, once it's over, I want plenty of those famous potatoes."

"Oh! Thank you! The world is saved!"

The chief and the others cheered at my nod.

The morning mist clinging to me felt like the incarnation of cold itself.

It held the chill of the darkness in its white shroud, slowly stealing my body heat even through my clothes.

—Mosel and I set out to defeat the Demon King early the next morning.

"—So? Is it far? Is this Jacob's hideout?"

As we walked along the narrow mountain path, I questioned Mosel's back as he walked a few paces ahead.

By the way, he had a sword hanging from his waist now, but naturally, it didn't look like it belonged there.

"Don't worry. It's not that far."

Mosel said, pushing through the tall grass.

"If we're just going there and back, it's the kind of place we can return from by noon."

"Hmm. Well then, let's just beat him quickly and get home."

"You say it casually, but don't let your guard down. After all, the opponent is a man called the Great Demon King of Nibbs Village... Whoops... be careful, the footing is tricky here."

"...No... um... it's not that I tripped... it's just that the name 'Great Demon King of Nibbs Village' sounds like a 'big fish in a small pond'—or rather, it sounds incredibly weak..."

"You think so? But—he's a terrifying opponent. Before he left the village, he was

just a violent man who boasted of his strength, so I only had to tremble from a slight distance. But now he's a violent man who can use magic, so I have to tremble from even further away."

"Fight! You're supposed to fight!"

"Heh. No need to worry. I'm a man too. Now that I know I'm the one destined to defeat the Demon King, I've said goodbye to the days of simply hiding in the shadows and shaking! With the expectations of the villagers and the support of your magic, I have the confidence to endure the shaking even if we encounter him!"

"That's the extent of your confidence!? ...Well... I didn't expect anything from the start, so it's fine..."

At my murmur, Mosel stopped dead.

I thought he might be angry—but what he said was something else.

"...A sound..."

"A sound?"

I stopped as well and listened intently.

Somewhere, a bird was chirping. The rustle of plants in the passing wind. These were sounds one would normally hear in the mountains.

But, mixed in with those, I could faintly hear—

I heard it. Some kind of noise.

A sound like dry pieces of wood clashing together.

It was slowly getting closer.

The mountain path stretching through the greenery vanished into the depths of the morning mist—and the sound was coming from beyond that.

"...Something... is there..."

Mosel's stifled whisper.

It was swaying. The morning mist.

No. Something deep inside it was moving.

Finally, parting the smoky white, a white shadow slowly appeared.

"—Hyeaaaaaaah!?"

Realizing what it was, Mosel let out a noisy scream, ran into the shadow of a nearby tree, and began to tremble violently on the spot.

"Hey! Weren't you done with shaking in the shadows?"

"Th-th-that's only if the opponent is a normal human like Jacob; when facing something like *that*, shaking is a fundamental human right and duty that I must claim!"

Certainly—well, from a normal person's perspective, it definitely wasn't pleasant to look at.

The thing that emerged from the morning mist—was an eerie white skeleton.

Though, it wasn't a moving human skeleton. It was much larger than a human adult, and its body was formed from various kinds of beast bones.

It was a "Bone Golem," a puppet made of bone created by magic. The hard sound I had been hearing was the clashing of its bones.

It looked quite creepy, but in terms of ability, it wasn't much different from a regular clay doll. In other words, it was just a cheap scare.

I chanted a spell under my breath—

"*Elmekia Lance!*"

The lance of light I released pierced the golem's body as if it were being sucked in—

Clatter-clatter-crunch-crash!

The countless interlocking bones fell apart with pathetic ease, spreading fruitlessly across the ground.

With a spell that deals direct damage to the opponent's spirit, I had collapsed the golem's control from the astral plane.

It was so effortless it felt foolish to even brag about it.

"...Is it over...?"

Sensing that the golem had fallen, Mosel cautiously emerged from the tree's shadow.

Perhaps having witnessed my strike, his tone had somehow become formal.

"Pretty much."

"...That was amazing, Lina-san. To defeat a monster like that with a single spell... I had no idea you were this strong. No, I've truly gained a new respect for you. With this, I'll be fine just trembling in the shadows during the fight with Jacob."

"...Yeah... even if you ask for my agreement like that, I can't exactly give you a thumbs-up... Regardless... things have turned out a bit differently than I heard."

Looking at the fragments of the golem, I murmured.

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"About our opponent. From what I heard, that Demon King guy could only use simple spells... but to manipulate something like *that*, you have to have studied the mystic arts properly."

When creating a golem, you use an incantation—the Language of Chaos—to call upon the spirits of the earth and have them control the materials. The composition of the spell changes every time depending on the target being called, the material, and the final shape.

Unlike *Lighting* or simple offensive spells, it's not a technique a total amateur can handle just by having someone teach them a memorized line.

At my words, Mosel turned pale for real.

"You mean... Jacob is steadily eating cabbage and powering up."

"No, I'm pretty sure the cabbage is irrelevant for now... The only other possibility is..."

Just then.

Cutting off the rest of my sentence—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

A voice resembling the death throes of a monstrous bird echoed through the trees!

"Wh... what was that!?"

"Th... this voice!"

Mosel and I were both thrown into a panic.

I knew. I knew exactly who this voice belonged to.

A ridiculous laugh that, once heard, would stick to your eardrums for two years and five months.

This was undoubtedly—

"It's been a while, Lina Inverse! But even I didn't think we'd meet in a mountain like this!"

As she spoke, a woman stepped out from the depths of the morning mist. She had long black hair, unnecessarily revealing clothes, spiked shoulder guards, and a skull necklace around her neck!

My self-proclaimed rival, a living paranormal phenomenon: Naga the White Serpent!

I glared at her head-on.

"Naga! I thought you'd returned to the wild ages ago... I can't believe you still have memories of when you were human!"

"Hey, Lina! Don't talk about me like I'm a stray animal!"

"But you *are* a stray! From the path of being a human being!"

"In what way!?"

"Get some self-awareness!"

Naga and I glared at each other, our gazes throwing sparks—

"...Um... excuse me, Lina-san, is that person... an acquaintance of yours?"

Mosel asked timidly from the side.

Without taking my eyes off her, I replied:

"Something like that. Probably, she was the one controlling that golem earlier."

"...So... it's not that Jacob ate cabbage, powered up, and transformed into this form?"

"What kind of terrifying cabbage exists in this world!? ...But, since you showed up at this timing... Naga, you've sided with Jacob, haven't you?"

"That's right."

The answer, however, came from a man's voice, not Naga's.

Stepping out from the shade of the trees behind Naga was a large, middle-aged man around thirty with a black beard.

He wore a cape with a black fur collar and a necklace made of a jumble of bones and stones—it was a cheap scare no matter how you looked at it.

So this man was—

"Jacob!"

Mosel shouted, though of course, he was already hiding behind a tree.

"You've found a strange ally, Jacob! But it's useless! You know, don't you? The prophecy passed down in the village. If the 'Demon King' that prophecy speaks of is you, then Mosel and I are the ones who will defeat the Demon King! In other words, you are destined never to beat us!"

"...Heh heh heh heh... Prophecy? Destiny? Don't make me laugh. Before the Great Demon King of Nibbs Village, Jacob Latard, everything is powerless! Much less a trivial prophecy; it's of no use!"

"...I mean, what are you acting so high and mighty for while hiding behind Naga? —Hey. You. Don't look away."

At my jab, Jacob took three steps back behind Naga, trembling slightly while stealing glances at me.

"...Hmph. A foolish question... ah, no, that's a good question, Sorceress. There's no way I could carelessly make eye contact with someone who defeated Naga-sensei's golem in one hit and talks to her as an equal!"

This guy has no backbone either.

...Well... you see them often. People who are strong against their own family or the weak, but incredibly weak against someone even slightly stronger.

Perhaps he had been put through some terrible things by Naga already and was feeling intimidated.

Anyway, this man didn't matter right now; the problem was Naga.

I glared sharply at her.

"—So? I bet you were collapsed in the mountains again and were saved by the Demon King there, so you're helping him for that reason?"

"Hmph. Your reading is shallow, Lina. This is a proper contract. I'm helping him get back at the villagers who are persecuting him."

"You sure accepted a tedious request."

"What about you?"

"Who cares about that?"

After I said it—

I suddenly realized something.

Nibbs Village did not look wealthy, to say the least.

I had accepted this job without expecting any cash income.

In that case, did Jacob, who was harrassing the village, actually have any money?

Judging by appearances, the answer was no.

Then what was Naga lured by when she accepted the request?

"—No way, Naga! You accepted the request for those potatoes too!?"

"You too!? Which means, Lina...!"

—Damn it!

By the time I thought it, it was too late.

In this moment, Naga and I both knew each other's goal.

Namely—those incredibly delicious Ratel Potatoes.

The potatoes weren't infinite.

If one of us ate them, the portion for the other would decrease. Furthermore, it would be difficult to get these potatoes anywhere else.

If that were the case—there could be no reconciliation or cooperation.

Naga and I glared at each other, keeping our distance as we began to chant spells under our breaths.

Neither Mosel nor Jacob was an opponent for me or Naga.

Ultimately, it was me versus Naga. The one who emerged victorious from this battle would be the one to claim the potatoes of victory!

Overwhelmed by the surging bloodlust, Jacob hurriedly hid behind a bush.

And then—

Our spells were complete!

"*Dill Brand!*"

We both released the same blast of wind simultaneously. Its power was truly that of a small typhoon. It had enough strength to easily blow away a standing person or demolish a poorly built shack.

There were two of them.

They collided head-on.

Gugooon!

All that could be heard was the sound, resembling an explosion, of the wind crashing against wind.

In the resulting turbulence, the rustle of scattering plants couldn't be heard, nor could the screams of the flying Mosel and Jacob.

And after the wind subsided.

Naga and I slowly picked ourselves up.

The moment we sensed the spells colliding, we had both dropped to the ground to let the raging hurricane pass over us.

When we stood up on the ground where the tall grass had been torn away and the earth was exposed in patches—

Both of us had already finished chanting our next spells.

And then.

"*Freeze Arrow!*"

"*Bomb Di Wind!*"

The incantations, explosions, and roars echoed through the trees.

The battle lasted longer than expected.

The morning mist had long since vanished, and the sun, showing its face, drew mottled patterns on the ground through the leaves.

Within that world woven of light and shadow, Naga and I raced.

Exchanging spell after spell.

—To be honest, if I just wanted to defeat Naga, it would have been easy.

Pretend to be bleeding and pass out. Throw some spare change to distract her. Or lure her into a false sense of security with some smooth talk.

However, even if I defeated Naga that way and got the potatoes, she would just resurrect immediately, come find me, and say:

"That was dirty, Lina. So, give me some of those potatoes."

Of course, it wouldn't make any sense, but if she spent the whole time screaming next to me, I wouldn't be able to enjoy the potatoes.

In other words, I had to fight normally and win a complete victory right here.

With neither of us able to land a decisive blow, the exchange of spells continued.

Dodging yet another of Naga's offensive spells with a leap to the side, I suddenly came out into a clearing—

"—Damn it!"

I cried out.

That place was none other than the outskirts of Nibbs Village.

While fighting, we had somehow ended up back at the village.

Fighting in a place like this would involve the village. I turned my eyes back toward the bushes I had jumped out from—

"*Flare Arrow!*"

Dodging the spell that came flying from there, I retreated a long way back—toward the village.

Before long, Naga stepped out from the bushes, of course.

She took a quick look around, a confident smile playing on her lips.

"Hmph. So this is it. The village that is unfairly persecuting Jacob."

As she spoke, she began to chant a spell!

—This is bad! She's planning to use this place as a battlefield!

Glancing back, I saw a house. If I recalled, it was the village chief's house.

Naga's spell was complete—

"If you dodge, it'll hit the house! *Damp Blayer!*"

She released the spell along with the warning! If I dodged, it would hit the chief's house! Of course, I dodged without hesitation!

Bagaah!

"Wh... what was that!?"

The chief's voice echoed from behind the broken wall.

"That was dirty, Naga!"

I shouted as I ran to the side.

She chased after me, saying:

"Hmph! Don't make me laugh, Lina Inverse! Who was it that just dodged that attack so easily without a second thought!?"

"Of course I'd dodge! But you've really done it now!"

I began to chant a spell.

Returning a grudge tenfold is a maiden's policy... or rather! If I left Naga alone like this, the damage to the village would only get worse! To prevent that, a little sacrifice was unavoidable!

I swallowed my tears and released the spell!

"*Flare Arrow!*"

"What of it? *Freeze Lance!*"

"I'm not done! *Burst Flare!*"

"Naïve! *Mega Brand!*"

Chuzuzuzugo-ga-do-chugo-chugo-do-zuuuun!

Countless spells tore through the atmosphere. Cold, flame, and lightning exploded with the will and power of destruction!

However, Naga and I continued to dodge each other's strikes, whether they crawled

along the ground or tore through the sky.

And before we knew it—Naga and I were facing off a little way outside the village.

Our gazes locked.

Both of us fell silent, catching our ragged breath.

...Man... this is getting to be a pain.

At this rate, it might be better to just take her down quickly, even if I knew she'd call me dirty or whatever later...

Just as I started thinking that.

"...I finally understand...!"

The voice from the side belonged to the village chief.

Glancing that way, I saw the villagers, led by the chief, holding clubs and other weapons.

But those were so powerless. Naga could manipulate offensive spells at will.

"Something like that won't work, you know!? Get back!"

In response to my advice, the chief's trembling voice came back:

"Y-you are the one who should leave! Demon King Lina!"

.....

"...*Huh?*"

Naga and I both cried out at once and instinctively looked at the villagers.

We were met with gazes of pure hostility.

".....Um..... Just now...?"

"I finally understand! Who the true Demon King is!"

Though terrified, the chief raised his voice and pointed his wooden stick—*zip!*—straight at me.

"The one with great power whose heart fell into darkness in the prophecy... it wasn't Jacob. It was referring to you!"

"...Wait...! Wait a minute! How am I a Demon King!?"

"Look around!"

The chief then pointed toward the village.

The rows of houses were in a bit of a state, thanks to being caught in the crossfire of mine and Naga's spells...

...Uh...

"No... um, this is, how should I put it..."

The villagers' gazes, fixed on the panicked me, were filled with intense hatred—

(The Demon King Descends: To be continued)

Next Episode Preview

Just as the ancient prophecy foretold, the Demon King Lina has finally awakened in the mountain village of Nibbs!

The Demon King commits every atrocity imaginable! A crisis closes in on the villagers!

Hurry to the village, Hero Mosel! Protect the village and the Ratel Potatoes!

But can his strength truly prevail against evil!?

...Eh? That’s not how the story goes?

Putting the details aside, the next episode is "The Demon King Descends" (Part 2).

Wait for it while huddling around a winter hot pot!

The Demon King Descends [Part 2]

A Not-Entirely-Inaccurate Summary

The village of Nibbs, nestled in the mountains.

There, the Demon King written of in the prophecy has finally been resurrected!

Guided by destiny, Lina heads out to subjugate the Demon King Jacob alongside the swordsman bearing the light, Mosel.

However, appearing before them were the Demon King and his new subordinate, Naga the White Serpent!

The fierce battle between Lina and Naga swept up the village, and Lina ended up facing a wild misunderstanding from the village chief!

—Namely—

That Lina herself might be the Demon King of the prophecy!

How will you handle this predicament, Lina!?

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

My bewilderment. The villagers' hostility.

Shattering them all, the voice that echoed around us belonged to none other than Naga.

She stepped between me and the villagers and declared to them:

"I suppose there's no helping it now that we've been found out! That’s right! The one standing here is my master, the one who shall return the world to darkness—the Flat-Chested Great Demon King, Lady Lina!"

"Wait a minuteeeeeeee!"

However, my retort was drowned out by the stir that rose among the villagers.

"I knew it!"

"There’s no doubt now! It’s her!"

"Damn you for tricking us!"

The villagers shouted accusations as they pleased.

"—I’m telling you, I—!"

Naga silenced my rising voice with a wave of her hand.

"Please wait, my Demon King. Now that it has come to this, there is no longer any need to tell such trivial lies."

"Wait a minuteeeeeeee!"

The voice that echoed out this time was not my own retort.

...*Murmur*...

The villagers buzzed at the sound of the voice.

"That shallow wit, trying to deceive the villagers with dirty lies and escape the prophecy! But! No one can change destiny! Your evil luck ends here!"

This voice, ringing out resplendently, was—

"Mosel!?"

"Where is he!?"

"Where!?"

Seeking the figure of the swordsman described in the prophecy, the villagers looked around—

"Over there!"

One of the villagers pointed at a single house!

In its shadow was an object hiding under a wooden crate and some rags, trembling violently!

"...Don't talk big while you're hiding!"

As I instinctively snapped at him, the village chief glared at me.

"Urgh! So you intend to provoke Mosel and defeat him before the second hero can be found!?"

"...Ah. No. That wasn't what I meant just now."

Ignoring me as I waved my hands frantically, the chief let out a passionate cry.

"Do not fall for her provocation, Mosel! Even if... even if something happens to us!"

"That’s...! You're telling me to abandon everyone in the village!? I can't do that! Not a thing like that! Even if I defeat the Demon King, a victory won by abandoning everyone has no meaning! Even if I can't defeat the Demon King, at least I'll try to stop her!"

Look. What you're saying is noble, but just get out from the shadows already, Mosel-kun.

"—Hmph. You're all talk, Mosel."

The one who spoke was—neither me nor Naga.

"You... Jacob!"

Mosel let out a cry of shock.

Yes. It was the voice of the man who had tormented the villagers and was called the Demon King.

Incidentally, his physical body was behind a shed a short distance from the house where Mosel was hiding.

From here, I could see the edge of his cape sticking out from the shadow of the building, trembling in small increments.

"I suppose you intend to take this opportunity to get revenge on the village!?"

"Wrong!"

He peeked his face out from the shadow, looked over here, and immediately ducked back in.

"You two over there. I'm sorry, but I'd like you to stop rampaging around here for now."

"...*What...!?*"

Everyone was surprised by the unexpected words.

"...Jacob... you..."

"Oops. Don't misunderstand, Mosel. I should have told you once: I am the one who will get revenge on this village. I won't let others ruin it. That’s all there is to it—"

He declared something that sounded rather cool.

...Well, in reality, I think it was just that since it was heading into winter, if the village disappeared, he'd be in trouble too, since he lived by swiping things from them.

"—Oh... I see... was that it!"

Hearing Jacob's words, the village chief let out a cry of emotion.

"...I... was making a terrible mistake... I was certain Jacob was the Demon King of the prophecy... but to think that Jacob was actually the sorcerer in the prophecy!"

At those words, the villagers let out a great "Ohh!"

"Now, here—the prophecy is fulfilled!"

The chief said, overcome with emotion as he turned a distant gaze toward the blue sky.

What was happening there was already a scene from a heroic epic.

Well, provided one ignored the fact that Mosel and Jacob were still hiding in the shadows.

...I mean...

"Naga! What are you going to do about this situation!? Because you tossed out that nonsense joke, we've become total villains!"

"Hmph. No need to panic, Lina. Something of this level can be handled easily."

With that, Naga stepped forward and pointed a finger sharply at the chief.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You're naive, Chief! It seems the prophecy says a swordsman and a sorcerer will defeat the Demon King... but that won't work on me, who is not the Demon King!"

"Ah! Come to think of it!"

"That logic might actually hold up!?"

Mosel and Jacob both panicked.

"That's wrong!"

Thwack!

I kicked the back of Naga's head.

"What do you think you're doing, provoking them!? I'm telling you to clear up the misunderstanding!"

"Oh! A falling out among thieves! Now's the time, you two!"

"*Right!*"

At the chief's instruction, Mosel and Jacob both raised their voices—

"...You go first, Mosel."

"Wh-what are you saying, Jacob? Don't be shy, you go ahead."

"Hmph... so you're scared, then."

"What are you talking about!? Of course I'm scared! I'm telling you that if you're not scared, you should go first!"

"Fool! Of course even I, Jacob Latard, am incredibly scared! In fact, I've been rattling so much since a moment ago that my legs won't move an inch forward!"

...Mmm. They sure were cool, those heroes of prophecy.

Anyway, taking this chance—

"Naga! We're retreating for now!"

With that, I grabbed Naga by the head and dashed off into the mountains.

"The Demon Kings are likely using my hideout as their base."

In the plaza at the center of the village—though it was really just a vacant lot.

A countermeasure meeting was being held there by the villagers, centered around the chief, Mosel, and Jacob.

"'Your hideout'? That was originally the village charcoal hut..."

"This is no time for such comments!"

Jacob sharply cut off the chief's retort.

"For now, the power of the awakened Demon King Lina is still small, and her only follower is that Naga woman. But what happens if the Demon King's power continues to grow? Eventually, she will surely call forth hideous monsters and demons from the demon world, manipulate them as subordinates, and try to destroy this village where we heroes reside! If that happens, we won't stand a chance!"

"B-but, since we have the swordsman and the sorcerer of the prophecy here..."

Jacob turned a condescending gaze toward the chief.

"And does that prophecy say, 'the village will be safe'? Hmm?"

"...Urgh...!"

The chief's face turned pale at the point.

"—However, even I don't find it amusing to let them have their way with this village. So, then. Actually, I have a plan. I want everyone to help me with it."

"What kind of plan?"

Asked by Mosel, Jacob gave a fearless smirk.

"First, the village folk will draw Naga away. Of course, I'm not saying to defeat her. Just buy some time. In the meanwhile, Mosel and I will defeat the Demon King Lina."

...*Murmur*...

An air of unrest spread among the villagers.

Jacob took note of that unrest.

"I'm not saying you have to do it. But if you don't, this village will undoubtedly be destroyed by the Demon King. Then, there's no choice but to do it, right? Or do you intend to say you don't give a damn about the village?"

The villagers fell silent at Jacob's question—or rather, his threat.

When put that way, they certainly couldn't say no.

"But Jacob, that's all well and good, but can the two of us really defeat that Demon King?"

To Mosel's question, Jacob again gave a composed smile.

"I have a plan for that too. First, you engage the Demon King. I'll handle the rest."

".....Wait a second."

But Mosel knit his brows.

"When we were kids... you told me, 'Go punch that dog. I'll take care of the rest,' and when I punched it, you ran away somewhere and I was the only one who got into a mess... surely you aren't planning to just egg me on and run away this time too...?"

"...Wh...!? Wh-wh-what are you talking about!? Th-there's no way I would do that! Forget those old, trivial grudges and believe in me now!"

Jacob declared flatly, though his eyes were clearly darting about. Naturally, there wasn't a shred of persuasiveness in his attitude.

"Then tell me what you're going to do after I go out first!"

"No, so, th-th-that is..."

"Hmph. You seem to be arguing quite a bit."

Snap!

Everyone on the scene froze at that voice from the side.

After a moment of paralysis and silence.

Everyone cautiously turned toward—the familiar sight of Naga, dressed in her evil sorceress outfit!

"*Uwaaaaaaaaaah!?*"

Everyone screamed and backed away.

"Th-th-they're attacking, they're attacking, what do we do, Jacob!?"

"D-d-d-don't p-panic, Mosel, do... do... just do what I said, uh, what was it again?"

"Hmph. No need to panic. I've brought you some good news."

With that, Naga brushed her hair back with a flourish.

"If you like, I could even help you with your Demon King subjugation."

—*Stillness*—

At those words, everyone's movement stopped again.

"—Wha— what do you mean...? I mean, what do you mean, Naga-sensei?"

Jacob was the first to snap out of it and wag his tail.

"Hmph. I've finally gotten tired of putting up with that Demon King's selfishness myself. She's temperamental, a glutton, selfish, flat-chested, short, and she uses violence or magic at the drop of a hat."

……

"However! I hear there's a swordsman and a sorcerer here who can defeat the Demon King!"

"Ohhhhh!"

The chief got excited again at those words.

"A betrayal by the enemy's female executive...! Urgh! It really feels like the fulfillment of the prophecy!"

"Howeeeeever!"

Naga jabbed a finger toward the chief.

"Since I am taking the risk of betrayal, I'll be in trouble if I don't get a proper reward."

"...A reward... you mean..."

"It's only natural, isn't it? If the Demon King is gone, I'll be out of a job."

What kind of job even is that?

...Regardless, in a tiny village like this, they couldn't have that much saved up...

"...I understand. Then... considering the repair costs for the village buildings, I can't give much... but from the village savings, how about one hundred gold coins?"

"Hi...!?"

One hundred!?

To be blunt, that’s a fortune. Honestly, I didn't think a tiny village like this could just cough up that kind of amount.

"One hundred... one hundred gold coins!?"

"Of course."

The chief answered Naga's question.

"How do you have that much money!?"

"Well... since our village's specialty Ratel Potatoes are mostly bought by royalty and nobility, they sell for a pretty good price."

They're actually rich, these guys!

Damn it, I was fooled by appearances!

"Hmph! In that case, I have no complaints! For a down payment of one hundred gold coins, I'll accept the job of helping defeat the Demon King!"

"Then please wait a moment."

With that, the chief went back to his house, and after a short wait—

When he came out again, he was carrying a small leather pouch.

Naga, having been handed it, checked the contents—

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I have indeed received the down payment!"

She let out a stupid laugh as her eyes changed color and hurriedly tucked away the leather bag—

At that moment.

"Burst Smoke" (Secretly)

Zd-ba-do-do-do-chu-do-pa-doon!

"*Uwaaaaaaaaaah!*"

What exploded was a spell that looked flashy but had little actual power—a cheap scare. The screams of the villagers overlapped with the numerous small explosions.

"...Heh... heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh."

At the low, muffled laugh that echoed out, everyone froze again.

"I thought you were acting strangely... and it turns out this was it! Naga!"

Along with the voice, the one who stepped out of the smoke was none other than me, Lina Inverse!

Why Naga had called me a Demon King and all that—this was the answer.

She set me up as the Demon King and fanned the villagers' sense of crisis. Then, she planned to pretend to betray me, side with the villagers, and pocket the

commission fee for herself.

But—I wasn't going to let her have all the fun.

I had been hiding in the nearby bushes with leaves over me and had heard everything from the start, so I timed it right and appeared, using the smoke of the spell as a screen.

I flapped my cape with a flourish and pointed toward Naga.

"Howeeeeever! I'll make you realize exactly what kind of end awaits those who betray Lina Inverse!"

"Tch...! It seems I was read! I have no choice then! I'll pin Lina down, so you guys take the opening and defeat her!"

"Ra-ra-ra-ra-right!"

"Le-le-le-le-leave it to us!"

At Naga's words, Mosel and Jacob nodded stiffly.

They probably wanted to say "Right!" and "Leave it to me!", but they were trembling so much their tongues wouldn't work.

Sensing the air of battle, the villagers hurriedly ran away.

Thus.

With the mountain village of Nibbs as the stage, the battle between me and Naga began!

How many spells were cast, I wonder?

How many techniques froze the earth, scorched the air, and shattered things of form?

The exchange of offensive magic between me and Naga continued for a long time.

The villagers watched from a distance.

Zgaaaaaaaaan!

Finally, some number of spells exploded, and the rising smoke drifted in the wind—

"...It seems you've truly made me angry!"

Bellowing, I threw off my cape with a flourish.

"I'll settle this with the next one!"

With that, I chanted a spell. Naga began her incantation at the same time.

Soon the spells were complete—

"*Fireball!*"

Two spells were released simultaneously!

Zdo-gugo-waaaaan!

A roaring explosion and bursting flames. The crimson created a hurricane, scattering sand and leaves.

After the dust and smoke had vanished, there stood the figures of me and Naga.

The villagers watched, breathless.

And then—

"...Urgh..."

I was the one who collapsed to my knees on the ground.

—*Oooooh!*

The villagers' cheers erupted.

There, Naga's voice rang out:

"...Now...! Together... the Demon King...! While... you have... the... chance...!"

Her words eventually lost their strength—and Naga slumped to the ground.

A sudden silence.

Under the gaze of the villagers, Naga remained motionless.

"—Mosel! Jacob!"

The chief's voice carried on the wind!

"Now's the time! The Demon King!"

"Ra-ra-ra-ra-ra"

"Le-le-le-le-le"

Aaaaah. They're still terrified. This lot!

Agh, how annoying! Fine then!

"Defeat her! Quickly!"

At the voice, Mosel and Jacob's trembling stopped.

They turned their gazes in shock toward the owner of that voice—namely, me.

I said, trembling slightly:

"...With that shock just now, my heart, which was possessed by the Demon King, has returned! But... I won't last long! While my heart is holding back my

movement! Attack!"

"If that’s the case, I won't hold back!"

"This Jacob will put you out of your misery!"

Hesitate a little, you pair of heroes.

Rather, saying so joyfully, Mosel brandished his sword and Jacob chanted a spell, taking the opportunity—

"Take this! Demon King!"

"Our strike of fury! *Flare Arrow!*"

Mosel threw his sword, scabbard and all, and Jacob released a pathetic arrow of flame!

I felt like throwing a sword while it was still in its scabbard wasn't a sword technique at all, but putting the details aside!

Chu-go-do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do-don!

"Im... impossibleeeeeeee!"

The eruption of explosions and the Demon King's scream!

And after the flames and smoke vanished—

I was no longer there.

"—Did we... win...?"

Mosel murmured dazed after a silence that lasted a while.

"Yeah. This is our victory."

Mosel said, nodding deeply—

—*Wooooooooooooooooooooo!*

The cheers raised by the villagers echoed through the mountain village.

"You did it! Mosel!"

"I've gained a new respect for you, Jacob!"

"...I... I believed you guys would do it..."

"—Well done! Both of you!"

Pushing through the congratulating villagers, the chief finally came before the two of them.

"...With your efforts... the Demon King has fallen, and the world is saved! Here,

the prophecy is fulfilled!"

"This is also thanks to the swordsman and the sorcerer of the prophecy coming together. Right, Chief?"

"Yeah, that’s right, Jacob."

"In other words, half of it is thanks to me."

"……?"

Feeling a catch in those words, the chief backed away slightly.

"...What do you mean, Jacob?"

"Oh, nothing much. I'm just saying that I, who saved the world, should get a proper reward."

"—Surely not, Jacob—!"

Mosel also backed away, his expression changing.

"You intended from the start—to swipe this village's cabbages that way!?"

"No. I don't know why cabbages are coming up there... anyway, don't say such unpleasant things. I'm just saying that it's only natural there should be a reward that isn't unfair. Since I saved the world, I won't say half of it—well. Let's see, for now... I'll settle for half of the village savings."

"How can that logic hold up!"

Mosel's voice rose against him as he said whatever he pleased.

He said, trembling while hiding behind the chief:

"If you have such a right, I should have the same right too! And I don't agree to giving away the village savings!"

But Jacob maintained his composed smile.

"That’s why I said it, isn't it? Half of the savings. I left the other half for you. I won't complain about how you handle or think about it. So. I won't have anyone complaining about what I do with my share."

"...Tch...!"

Against that ridiculous sophistry, Mosel had no way to argue back.

"If you do that, the village will be ruined!"

The chief raised his voice again.

However.

"That’s none of my concern."

"...Damn you, Jacob...! Acting so high and mighty... hah!"

The chief suddenly had a look of horror.

"—Su— surely...! Was the Demon King in the prophecy actually you after all...?"

"Wait...! Wait a minute, Chief! How can you have such a selfish interpretation!?"

Being called a Demon King again, Jacob naturally looked worried.

"For starters, that woman—Lina Inverse—was the Demon King, wasn't she!?"

"No! Perhaps you, the Demon King who feared the fulfillment of the prophecy, were using a spell to manipulate her!"

"How can you have that kind of logic! If you're going that way, Chief, we could also think that *you're* the Demon King! Pinning the stigma of the Demon King on me and that traveling sorcerer, and pretending to be the guardian of the prophecy yourself to escape trouble! That sounds like something a Demon King would do!"

"...Wh...! How rude! In what way am I a Demon King!?"

"Your beard, your wrinkles, your shifty nature—they're all like that!"

"What do you mean, shifty!? Your pathetic outfit looks much more like a Demon King's!"

"...Now, now, Chief and Jacob, both of you calm down."

"You shut up, Mosel! Or what!? Are you actually the Demon King!?"

"Wh...! You can't say that no matter what, Chief! The one who calls someone a Demon King is the Demon King!"

"Are you a child!?"

"If I'm a child, are you the Demon King?"

"Whhhhhhhhat!?"

...How...

"HOW NOISY! *FIREBALL!*"

Zundom.

Unable to watch any longer, the fireball of magic I released blew away the three who were trying to pin the "Demon King" title on each other.

The group, who had collapsed with a thud, somehow raised their heads while wobbling.

"...Ugh... you... hah...!"

"...Lina... Inverse...!"

"To think... you were alive..."

"I *am* alive!"

Slipping out from the depths of the bushes, I stuck my chest out proudly.

"Hey, Lina, what is the meaning of this?"

"It means stop the boring acting," I replied.

"Hmph... and here I was, putting my heart and soul into a truly convincing performance of playing dead." With those words, Naga, who had been lying nearby, popped up and sat right back up.

"Whaaaaaaaaat!?" The whole group was shocked yet again.

Of course, it goes without saying that the "battle" between Naga and me up until now had been a total sham. The moment the Village Chief and Naga started calling me a "Demon King," I had already read Naga's plan to betray me and monopolize the reward money. So, I had led her into the mountains and brought up a certain proposal. Namely—why don't we let the prophecy be fulfilled?

Fleeing the village as we were was one option, but we ran the risk of being wanted as the criminals who destroyed it. Therefore, we decided to play the parts of the Demon King and her traitorous subordinate, pretending to take each other down.

There was still a chance Naga would betray me for real, but I persuaded her with a "sweet deal": *"If you cooperate properly, I'll exempt you from the sentence of being weighed down by a golem and sunk into the Demon Sea."*

Using attack magic aimed to miss, we staged a flashy battle; first, Naga would fake being defeated, then I—timing it with Mosel and Jacob's attack—would retreat while using my own attack spell as a smokescreen. I was supposed to pretend to be destroyed. That was the original plan. However, I got so fed up with the utter stupidity of the Village Chief, Jacob, and Mosel that I couldn't help but blast them with an attack spell.

"Kuh...! So it was a tactic to lure us into a false sense of security by playing dead!"

"NO, IT WASN'T!" As the Chief continued to talk in his sleep, I pointed a finger sharply at him.

"I went along with your little prophecy game and even put on a boring act of being a Demon King, but I'm sick of it! In the first place, you talk about 'The Prophecy' this and 'The Prophecy' that, but there's no guarantee it'll come true, and you don't even know if your interpretation is right! If you caused someone's death because of a wrong prophecy or a bad interpretation, what would you do then!? Could you take responsibility and bring that person back to life!?"

"W-well... no, that's..."

"You can't, right!? Then don't go around calling people 'Demon King' so recklessly!"

"B-but the prophecy is an honorable one passed down through my family for generations..."

"Since when!? What's the origin!?"

"When I was a child... my grandfather hand-wrote it on parchment..."

"DON'T TAKE SOMETHING LIKE THAT SERIOUSLY!"

Z-do-goon! Along with my retort, the attack spell I released blew the Chief away again. Good grief! This guy believed a made-up story for children until this very moment!

"Next! Jacob!"

"Oh? Are you trying to defeat me with logic?"

"Not worth it! I'm just blowing you away without further ado!"

"Wait a min—" *Ba-don-zu.*

"And finally! Mosel and you villagers!" The whole group trembled at being called out. "You're also to blame for blindly believing the Chief's sleepy prophecy without thinking! Normally, as a lesson, I'd want to blow away the whole mountain with an attack spell... but I'll overlook it this time. In exchange, from now on, don't just swallow what others say; think for yourselves. Alright, let's go, Naga."

"Hmph. Quite right." With that, Naga and I let our capes flutter in the wind and turned our backs on the small mountain village.

"Please wait!" The voice of someone calling out hit our backs.

"Is there something else?" As I turned around to ask, one of the villagers bowed his head. If I recall correctly... it was Villager A, whom I saw at the Chief's house.

"I'm sorry for the trouble we caused. Hearing you, I finally woke up. Truly, thank you. You're right... we were also wrong for blindly swallowing the Chief's words without thinking."

"As long as you understand," I said, giving a sweet smile.

Villager A also wore a refreshing smile. "So, that aside, the fact that you two reduced the village to ruins with your attack spells remains unchanged..."

Snap! Naga and I froze, so stiff we almost made a sound.

"And, to add to that, I believe the commission fee given to Naga-san over there for 'betraying the Demon King' would now be null and void."

AAAAAAAH! This guy noticed something totally unnecessary! I was planning to leave on a high note with a moral lesson and then split those 100 gold coins with

Naga later! Regardless, showing agitation here would be a loss. I feigned composure.

"But well, my own request to defeat Jacob has been properly fulfilled this way—"

"Didn't you say yourself, Lina-san, that Ratel Potatoes would be enough for the reward?"

Hah! Come to think of it, I have a distant memory of blathering something like that! You sure remember the most inconvenient things, Villager A!

"Hey. Then what about the price for calling me a Demon King?" Hiding my internal panic, I asked while pretending to be angry, but the nameless man replied with a pleasant smile.

"We certainly feel responsible for that. Lina-san is no Demon King; she's a proper person who can be reasoned with."

I nearly groaned. It sounded like a simple compliment, but it was essentially a warning: *"Don't try to go on a rampage or run away."* D-damn you, you're good, Villager A!

In contrast to me, who was breaking into a cold sweat, the nameless man smiled brightly. "As an apology for the trouble of calling you a Demon King, we decided not to charge for the repairs of the buildings you destroyed. And as thanks for punishing Jacob, we'll give you the potatoes. So, you can return the 100 gold coins the Chief gave you earlier, right?"

"....."

"....."

"Right?"

I couldn't find a single opening in Villager A's smile...

And so.

"The potatoes are tasty, aren't they?"

"Yeah. They're tasty. The potatoes."

We returned the 100 gold coins we had once held. Naga and I left the small village behind, munching on steamed potatoes while carrying a weary atmosphere and our spuds...

(The Demon King Descends: The End)

Love is Strong [Part 1]

"Stop! Let Rachel go!"

"Hehehe. It's your own fault for showing off in a place like this. We're borrowing this girl for a bit."

"Ah! Marcus!"

"Stop! Rachel! Rachel!"

"Marcus! Marcus!"

"Rachel! Rachel!"

"Ma-rcuuuuuuus!"

"Ra-cheeeeeeeel!"

...So...

"SHUT THE HELL UP, FIREBALL!"

Zun-dom.

As I woke up, the attack spell I released pulverized the people caught up in that messy situation in a single blow.

"...I feel almost grateful that you saved us from a dangerous spot."

"Except for the moment I briefly saw my dead grandfather waving at me in a field of flowers, it really was a help. Thank you very much."

With that, the scorched man and woman bowed to me. This was by the shore of a lake slightly outside the city. I had finished my lunch after fishing here, and since the sunlight felt so good, I was taking a nap in the shade of a nearby tree—until I was forced awake by the commotion earlier.

By the way, the five or six men who had been blown away together scrambled and fled as soon as they regained consciousness. It seemed that while these two were on a walk or something, they had been harassed by thugs. Both looked to be slightly under twenty. Both had black hair, but maybe that was just because they were scorched.

The two looked into each other's eyes and took each other's hands. "Still, I'm so

glad you're safe, Rachel. Though you're a bit charred."

"I'm just glad you're safe too, Marcus. Though you're a bit charred. But I told you, Mar-cus... as long as we have our feelings of love for each other, there is no-thing that can tear us apart."

"Hahaha. You're right, Ra-chel. In other words, this is precisely—"

"The power of love." Their voices harmonized perfectly.

...No... somehow... I feel like I really understand how those thugs felt...

"But looking at you like this... even scorched, you're wonderful."

"You too... you're so bronzed and robust."

"In that case, maybe those thugs were just a trial of love to test our love."

"Oh, Marcus, you're such a poet. Then that person must be—"

With that, the two turned their eyes toward me and harmonized beautifully once more—

"The Cupid of our love."

You're damn annoying.

"Fireball."

Zuba-dogo-guan!

With an expressionless face, the attack spell I released blessed the stupid couple once more with the flames of purgatory.

"Actually, I have a request I'd like to ask of you." As the Council Chairman spoke, a sharp light dwelt in his eyes.

Prokium City Mages Guild. I had simply dropped by the city and popped my head in to say hello, but for some reason, I was suddenly hauled off to the Chairman's office. The room had already been cleared of people; only the Chairman and I remained. He looked to be over forty, maybe older. He had his hair—whether it was white or silver I couldn't tell—slicked back, and a mustache of the same color. With a slender build and features reminiscent of a bird of prey, he gave off the distinct impression of being highly capable.

"This is not a request from the Prokium City Mages Guild. It is a request from me personally, Clark Sandritt. Please listen with that in mind." I nodded silently. The Chairman stood up and looked out the window. "Actually—I have one son. Recently, he got caught up with a strange woman."

"...I see." I gave a vague acknowledgment to the confusing start of the story.

"Therefore," he said, turning back toward me, "I want you to break my son and that woman up."

"......Huh?" For a moment, I couldn't understand what he had said, and I let out a dumbfounded sound.

However, paying no mind to that, the Chairman continued calmly. "I don't mean to boast, but our Sandritt family is a fairly distinguished lineage. My grandfather served as a court mage for the royal family and held an honorary title, and I am the current Guild Leader. Naturally, there will be unscrupulous individuals who try to seduce my young son to target our family's fortune and honor. I cannot allow my only son to marry such a woman. I intended to find him a suitable partner eventually, but it seems an undesirable woman has beaten me to it. That is where you come in, Lina Inverse!"

"...Um, a question." I timidly raised my hand. The Chairman pointed at me. "Yes, Lina-kun?"

"So... I don't really get why my name is coming up here..."

"Hahaha. No need to play dumb, Lina-kun." The Chairman grinned, as if to say he knew everything. "I know. Back in your hometown, you were called 'Lina the Red Thread Cutter'."

"Wh—!? Where did you hear that!?"

"Hmph. Don't underestimate my investigation network. In order to break my son and that woman up, I conducted a thorough investigation into experts in that field. Your name, Lina-kun, was among those that came up."

"Wait a second, old man! What kind of expert in what field are you talking about!? I'm not some weird thing like that!"

"Now, now. No need to be modest, Lina-kun."

"...No, it's not modesty, I'm genuinely disgusted."

"...I see, you have your reasons and want to keep it hidden. Fine. You aren't an expert. Let’s proceed with that understanding."

"No, what do you mean 'with that understanding'..." I felt like there was a massive and fatal misunderstanding occurring... but it seemed that whatever I said would be in vain.

It’s true that for a while back home, I was called "Lina the Red Thread Cutter," but that was simply because every couple I tried to play matchmaker for ended up breaking up at nearly three times the normal speed... Uh... It wasn't like I had any ill intent. Yeah. It must have just been the result of me interfering only with

couples destined to end up that way.

While I was thinking that, the Chairman turned his back to me and faced the window, beginning to speak as if talking to himself. "Anyway, I believe some kind of external interference is necessary to wake my son Marcus up. If there were someone who would do that, I would be extremely grateful to that person."

"...Marcus?" I instinctively frowned. "Wait... you don't mean the woman's name is Rachel, do you?"

The moment I asked, the Chairman spun around as if spring-loaded. "Oh! You know her, Lina-kun! As expected of someone who has made a name for themselves in this industry, your research is fast!"

"What... industry...?" Actually, am I famous? In some nonsensical industry like that? ...I see... it's one half of that stupid couple I blew up by the lake... his son... Somehow, I felt like the problem was entirely due to the parent's bad upbringing...

"If you ask the people in town, you'll surely find where they are. I'm counting on you, Lina-kun."

"...No, like I said, I won't accept a request like that."

"Hahaha. I know. We'll leave it at that."

He doesn't understand at all! Anyway—it was certain that saying anything more would be a waste of time. I left the Chairman's room, dragging a heavy sense of exhaustion behind me.

By the time the sun went down and the city lights flickered on, Prokium City turned into a sea of stars fallen to earth. Because the city itself was built on the middle of a large slope, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say the entire city was a slope, except for the inside of buildings. At the highest point of the city was an observatory. On a clear day, you could see across the border all the way to Telmode City.

I heard that a mayor from several generations back noticed the great view. He worked with the Mages Guild to install streetlights throughout the city and had the guild mages go around lighting magical lamps at night. This proved hugely beneficial for both improving public safety and tourism. It even got to the point where people said you couldn't talk about tourism without seeing Prokium, and the idea of night lighting was supposedly ripped off by Atlas or some other city, which also became a hot topic.

The reason I had come to this city in the first place was because I had heard such rumors. I took a room at an inn near the observatory and waited for nightfall before heading out to see the night view. The tourists loitering about were a bit bothersome, but indeed—the city's night view was beautiful. Above was a sky full of stars. Below were countless shimmering lights. Looking at such a sight, the

daytime events—encountering the stupid couple, being asked a weird favor by the Chairman, and getting incredibly tired climbing the long slope—instantly vanished...

"It's beautiful, isn't it, Rachel?"

"Yes... it's wonderful, Marcus."

Snap.

I froze on the spot at the voices coming from beside me. Without even wanting to look, the figures of the two standing nearby entered the edge of my vision.

"No, Rachel... when I said 'beautiful,' I was talking about you."

"Ehehe... Me too, Marcus. When I said 'wonderful,' I was talking about you."

"Hahaha. You're too much."

"Oh, Marcus."

"The light of the stars and the city reflected in your eyes is like a shimmering jewelry box."

"But to me, Marcus, you are a more precious trea-sure than any glowing jewel."

I'm sorry. I apologize. I don't want to get involved. I'm leaving. Immediately. So please forgive me. Praying to something I didn't quite understand, I somehow managed to relax my stiffened body, suppressed my presence and footsteps, and slowly, slowly moved away from the spot—

"...Oh? Hey, Marcus, isn't that person...?"

But then, mercilessly, Rachel's voice was raised clearly toward me. Then came Marcus's voice. "Ah... you're... the Cupid-san!"

"WHO ARE YOU CALLING THAT!?" I instinctively retorted. ...Ah! Dammit! I should have just said "You have the wrong person" with all my might and run away!

But it was too late for that now. The two walked up to me. "Thank you for your help earlier today. But why did you cast an attack spell on us at the end?"

"Marcus, I'm sure it's because bad people were approaching to tear us apart again without us noticing. I'm sure Cupid-san noticed and did that."

Don't call me Cupid-san. I thought it, but my mouth—no, my body wouldn't budge an inch.

"I see! Surely that's it, Rachel, you're right. Besides, as long as we're safe, that's enough."

"That's right. Flames like those won't burn out our love."

How about I try burning the two of you until you're ashes? A part of my brain that had completely cooled down whispered those words, but my body and mouth still wouldn't move.

"Actually, we were looking for you," Marcus said, still holding hands with Rachel. "Recently, strange groups have been harassing us all the time. The thing at the lake today was one of them."

"I wonder if some woman fell in love with Marcus and is trying to tear us apart. Because Marcus is just so won-der-ful."

"I wonder if some man fell in love with Rachel and hired those thugs. Because Rachel is just so beautiful."

"This must be a trial of love imposed upon us."

Don't harmonize there.

"Ah, but I can't bear for my dear Rachel to be in danger every time."

"It hurts my heart so much when Marcus is in danger every time."

"That was when you appeared."

Marcus took a gold coin from his pocket. "Surely, you must be the one who will drive away the villains trying to block our love—the Cupid of Love sent to us by destiny. After talking it over, that’s the answer we came to. ...This is the only way we can thank you, but... please. Protect our love."

Saying this, he took my still-frozen hand and forced the gold coin into my grip.

"Now we can feel safe. Right, Marcus?"

"That's right, Rachel."

"Ehehehehehe."

"Hahahahahaha."

Their laughter echoed somewhere in my head—and it wasn't until past midnight, when everyone else had disappeared, that I finally came to my senses and was able to move.

Let’s get out of here. I'll be killed at this rate. Determined, I prepared to leave the inn early the next morning—just as the sky was beginning to turn pale. There was no one on the road; the world was filled only with morning mist and the voices of birds. Now was the only chance. My instinct told me so. Before I met them—those idiots of a couple—I had to leave this city and run somewhere far away. It was the only way to survive. You might think I was being dramatic or ridiculous, but I genuinely felt that way.

Marcus had forced the gold coin into my hand, so I decided to keep it as thanks for

helping them by the lake. To be honest, if I went back to return it and had to listen to their knocked out babbling again for hours, I really wouldn't survive this time. I passed through the empty first floor of the inn and was about to pay the innkeeper's girl who was sweeping the floor—

"Oh, Cupid-san."

Splat!

The cleaning girl—Rachel—turned around and spoke, and I flat-out wiped out.

"Wh-wh-wh-why are you in a place like this!?"

"Why...? Well, I'm the daughter of this house. To meet here, you really are our Cupid of Love."

"NOOOOOOOOOWAAAAAAAAAA!" I clutched my head and screamed.

"I know. If you'll beat up the bad people trying to trample our love, I'll give you a discount on the room!"

"...Uh, look, there seems to be a misunderstanding, so I'll just say this... I have absolutely no intention of accepting such a request."

When it was just her alone, she didn't have as much mental destructive power, so this time I could speak properly. As I flatly refused, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Eh!? Why would you suddenly say that, Cupid-san!?"

"Listen! My name is Lina. Lina Inverse. Cupid-san isn't my name, so keep that in mind!"

"...I see... so that means you'll accept after all!"

"NO, IT DOESN'T!"

"This is perfect timing. I just finished cleaning, and I was about to go 'incidentally' run into Marcus on the main street."

"No, like I said, listen to me... 'Incidentally' run into him?"

"Yes." As I questioned her, she wore a pleasant smile.

"Usually, around this time, we 'incidentally' meet on the street to confirm the strength of our destiny and have breakfast together. After that, we part once to do our respective jobs, then at noon, we have a fateful reunion at the lake outside town and play tag on the beach. After noon, we go back to work again, and in the evening, we happen to run into each other at the central park for a date and dinner. Then we talk about love while looking at the stars at the observatory—that's been our daily routine for about a month now... Um, why are you running away, Cu... I mean, Lina-san?"

"Please let me go, I'll never come back to this city again!" Being grabbed by the back of my cape, I pleaded half-crying. They're the real deal. These two are high-tier morons. Dad, Mom, Sis, help me.

But Rachel, mercilessly, pulled me along with a strength surprising for her thin arms. "Now, Lina-san. Let’s go and stop saying such nonsensical things."

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" But my scream only echoed hollowly in the now-empty inn lobby...

"Hey! Rachel!"

"Oh! Marcus! What a coincidence to meet you in a place like this."

"No, Rachel... this isn't a coincidence—it's destiny—...By the way, Rachel, who is that person crouching over there with their head in their hands...?"

"Yes. Our Cupid of Love. She says her name is Lina-san."

"Heh. Even Cupid-san has a name. So, Lina-san, why are you suddenly trying to run away?"

"Just let go of my cape, you! ...No... I mean! How should I put it! I thought if I were nearby, I'd be in your way!"

"Oh, is that all? You don't need to worry about that, Lina-san."

"Yes. No matter who is nearby, our love will not change."

"I'm telling you I want to run away because *I* hate it... I'm not saying 'Love' or whatever is bad, but look at your surroundings a bit more! Your surroundings!"

"Surroundings..."

"Are you saying...?"

The two looked around the town shrouded in morning mist—and then, their eyes met, they took each other's hands, and once again, their voices harmonized.

"The world is blessing us. In other words, that's what it means."

Ugh. I want to kill them. I clutched my increasingly aching head with both hands—and then.

"Well, well. Showing off quite a bit in the early morning, aren't you, you two?"

"Always flirting, flirting, flirting. You guys are annoying."

The crude voices that drifted over sounded like the gospel of angels to my ears right now. Looking over, a group of five or six thug-like men were walking toward us from across the street.

"Y-you guys...!"

"It's alright, Marcus. We have Lina-san with us!"

"ALRIGHT!" I regained my spirit and turned toward the thugs.

"Y-you! From yesterday!?" One of the thugs, a bearded man, cried out in surprise upon seeing me. ...Yesterday... so these are the thugs I blew away by the lake?

"You guys!" I stomped over, grabbed the recoiling bearded man by the collar, leaned into his ear, and whispered, "...You were hired by the Chairman, weren't you? To break those two up."

"H-how did you know that!?" The man was honestly shocked, his surprise deepening. It was hard to imagine the Chairman hadn't taken any action until I happened to drop by the city. If so, the thugs the couple mentioned were likely hired by him.

"Listen. I'm going to get 'beaten' instantly because I'm not strong enough! You guys better finish those two off properly! I'm sure the Chairman told you not to hurt Marcus too much, but forget that. You understand what I mean? If you slack off, I'll hit you with something that'll make yesterday's blast feel like lukewarm water. You'll become cinders that even your parents won't recognize—no, you won't. You'll probably turn to ash in an instant, not even a bone left, and say goodbye as you're blown away by the wind. If you don't want to be on the missing persons list... you understand, right?"

"I-I-I understand, but... aren't you on their side, lady...?"

I pointed my eyes toward Marcus and Rachel behind me. "What are you saying!? Those existences are the enemies of humanity itself!"

"E-enemies of humanity... well, it's true they're really annoying to look at..."

"Whatever! Let’s do it!" I jumped away from the men and shouted, "Come on, you thugs! Hah! Oh no, I'm beaten!"

"TOO FAST!" Everyone's voices harmonized at my acting as I collapsed.

"...Hey, Marcus, didn't it look like Lina-san just fell down even though those people didn't do anything?"

"I-it certainly did..."

SHUT UP! My brain is bursting from being around you two, so I can't focus on my acting! Lying on the road, I urged the men with my eyes.

"Hmph. What you see isn't everything. This is what it's like when we get serious!" A nice follow-up from the bearded man.

"...But didn't you just say 'Too fast!' just now?" Marcus noticed something unnecessary.

"Agh! I'm saying not everything in the world can be explained with logic!"

Just do it. Hurry.

"Anyway, you guys are an eyesore." The bearded man took a step forward—and then.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

That familiar stupid laughter fell upon us at the absolute worst timing...

It didn't even take ten seconds for all the thugs to be blown away.

"...Hmph. It seems I was mistaken..."

After blowing away the thugs, the four of us entered a nearby eatery and had breakfast. The owner of that stupid laughter—my self-proclaimed rival, Naga the White Serpent—was slumped over the table, deeply reflecting. Of course, the reason went without saying. It was because she couldn't bear the words and actions of the two flirting across the table.

"...I'd like to say 'as long as you understand'... but what are you going to do about this situation..." I said in a completely exhausted voice. The stupid couple was still blathering about something while flirting, but my senses had seemingly gone numb; their words no longer entered my ears. No, that's wrong. I could hear them, but my brain was refusing to understand them. As proof, while I couldn't understand their words, fatigue was surely piling up like sediment.

Naga, since it was her first time, seemed to be hit even harder, looking as limp as seaweed washed up on a beach. While watching Rachel feed Marcus dessert fruit out of the corner of my eye, most of my five senses were paralyzed.

But even so. Naga and I sensed it at the same time.

GOGAAAN!

The next moment, the eatery was blown away by a direct hit from an attack spell.

"...Hehehe... surely they won't survive this." The suppressed laughter came from a small shadow perched on the roof. Wrapped in loose clothing with their face covered by a long cloth except for the eyes, neither their age nor gender was clear. The voice was muffled, making it sound like either a high-pitched man or a low-pitched woman.

"You overdid it." Muttered a large man crouching next to them. This one also had his face covered with something like bandages except for the eyes, but his strangely hunched upper body was bare, and his voice was clearly that of a man.

"Do you have a complaint? About my way of doing things?"

"I certainly do."

The two strangely-dressed figures turned as if snapped by that voice coming from the side. On the same roof as them—there we were. Naga and I, who had sensed the killing intent and escaped the shop just in time! Of course, we left Marcus and Rachel in the shop.

"Y-you guys!?" As the small one cried out in surprise, Naga and I pointed our fingers sharply and said:

"I don't know why you did that!"

"But it's just bad luck that we happened to be there!"

"The price for picking a fight with us—"

"We'll make you pay it in full."

As we were about to chant— "Wait!" The large man shouted to stop us. He turned his gaze toward me. "I know that face. You... are you 'Lina the Red Thread Cutter'!?"

"What!? Is that her!?"

"WAIT JUST A MINUTE!" I immediately retorted. "Why do I have such a nonsensical nickname!? And why is my face known!?"

But the large man laughed through his nose at my words. "Why play dumb? There's no one in this industry who doesn't know your name. ...Forgive my late introduction. I am Gilmezia, 'The One Who Mocks Bonds'."

"I am Lulogue, 'The One Who Breaks Destiny'," the small one added.

Naga frowned slightly...

"……Hey, Lina, what was that? Are they friends of yours?"

"Not a chance. I've never even heard their names before."

"……Kuh……!" Upon hearing my words, the small one let out a sharp groan. "……It's true that you are the superior in this industry. However, to claim you have never even heard our names…… you certainly know how to talk."

"Surely you don't mean to tell us—now that you have stepped onto the path of carnage—that you intend to quit the relationship-breaking industry?"

Um…… what on earth is the "relationship-breaking industry," or rather, I have no memory of ever entering such a thing…… While I hesitated over how to respond to a statement that was nothing but a series of things to nitpick, Naga shrank back slightly and gave me a look as if she were staring at a strange, alien object.

"……Lina…… you…… just what kind of world have you stuck your foot into……?"

"I HAVE NO MEMORY OF STICKING MY FOOT INTO ANYTHING LIKE THAT!" I screamed with every ounce of my being. Honestly, being looked at like that by Naga made me feel like something fundamental to my humanity had been insulted, and it made me incredibly angry.

"……A-anyway! If you're talking about the 'relationship-breaking industry,' does that mean you guys were hired by someone to come here and break up Marcus and Rachel?"

"……Ho……" At my words, Lulogue let out a voice filled with admiration. "Since you know those two, it seems you also approached them while carrying some kind of mission after all."

"……"

"……!"

As Naga directed a silent, accusing glare at me, I frantically shook my head from side to side in silence.

"However…… I don't know what you were plotting, but it's a pity. With a single strike of my technique, look, there they go. There is no longer any future for those two." Lulogue spoke while pointing toward the eatery that had been reduced to rubble—

Clatter! Pushing aside the pile of debris, Marcus and Rachel appeared, still holding hands.

"Ah…… were you safe, Rachel?"

"Yes…… are you alright, Marcus?"

"Of course. With the strong power of my thoughts for you, something like that is nothing at all."

"Me too. *Ufu*. But for both of us to be safe like this—" Taking each other's hands and gazing into one another's eyes, their voices harmonized perfectly.

"This is truly the power of love."

"……"

"IF YOU'RE GOING TO FINISH THEM OFF, DO IT PROPERLY!"

Directed at Lulogue, who remained frozen mid-point, the voices raised by Naga

and me harmonized with magnificent precision.

(To be continued)

Next Episode Preview

Love. It is a precious thing.

Love. A gentle heart that cherishes others.

Love. But is it truly something immutable?

Numerous obstacles befall two lovers. Will they be able to overcome them safely?

Does fulfillment or ruin wait at the end of their path?

What is love? What is man? What is woman? What is a human being?

To be perfectly honest, I don't give a damn.

It’s so ridiculous I can barely stand to write it. Next time: **"Love is Strong" (Part 2)!** Wait for it with a cold, dead stare!

Love is Strong [Part 2]

Synopsis

The sightseeing town, Prociam City.

It was there that Lina encountered the ultimate "idiot couple," Marcus and Rachel.

Mistaking Lina for a relationship-breaker, Marcus's father, Council Chairman Sandrit, requested she tear the two apart!

Naga stuck her nose in and became miserable!

Lulogue and Gilmezia, the professional relationship-breakers, tried to split them up!

And the idiot couple just kept flirting, completely oblivious to everything happening around them!

Caught in the middle and dubbed a "Cupid of Love" by the couple, what will become of Lina's fate!?

"Look, Marcus!"

It was Rachel's voice that rang out.

While holding one of his hands amidst the rubble, she pointed toward us with the other.

"There are Cupids over there!"

"……'s?"

Upon hearing that word, Naga muttered with a look of pure, soul-deep disgust and turned a pleading gaze toward me.

I nodded to her with a grim expression.

"……It seems…… you've been officially designated as Love Cupid Number Two……"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

At my heartless declaration, Naga let out a scream, curled into a ball, and began to sob.

……Hmph…… I suppose the shock was just too great……

——Speaking of shock——

When I turned my eyes away, I saw the two assassins also standing there, frozen in sheer bewilderment.

Ugh! Just hurry up and attack the idiot couple already!

"You two over there!"

At the sound of my voice, the assassins finally turned their gaze toward me.

"I don't care how noble your goal is, I won't forgive you for trying to drag me into this! Once you've finished off Marcus and Rachel, I'm going to show you exactly what's what, so get ready!"

"What……!"

At my words, Lulogue ground his teeth together.

"Are you saying that if we can't even handle those two, you won't even bother treating us as opponents!?"

No. I just simply wanted you to hurry up and do *something* about those two……

"Fine, then we'll do it! Just as you asked!"

He howled, glaring at Marcus and Rachel, and began chanting a spell under his breath! Go for it, Lulogue! Do it, Lulogue!

"Wait."

However, it was his partner Gilmezia who called for a halt.

"Calm down. Don't fall for their tricks."

"……Tricks…… you say?"

At those words, Lulogue interrupted his chanting and turned his gaze toward the large man.

"Yes. She is, for better or worse, at the top level of the industry. There must be a precise calculation behind every move she makes. Therefore, even that provocation just now was done with a purpose."

"Purpose——? For what?"

"I don't know. But in any case, it’s certain she has some kind of plan."

"No. I don't. Really."

"……I see. The way she immediately denies it while feigning composure is incredibly suspicious."

Lulogue spoke in response to my words.

Aaaaagh. This is why people who have fallen into paranoia are so……

"Sorry, but we have no intention of falling for your schemes. However, as long as I cannot read your true intentions, we shall withdraw for now."

The moment they spoke, the two kicked off the roof.

"As if I'd let you escape! Naga! We're following them! ……Naga!"

I leaned close to the ear of Naga, who was still crouching and clutching her knees.

"……Pull yourself together! This is our chance! We'll pretend to chase after those two and just skip town!"

"……I see! Hmph! I understand, Lina!"

She finally revived, and the two of us kicked off the roof to pursue the assassins.

Perhaps because of the time lag spent persuading Naga, by the time we descended from the roof to the ground, the assassins were already nowhere to be seen.

But at this point, I didn't care about that.

"Anyway, let's dash for freedom!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Aiming for a bright tomorrow, the two of us ran through the alleyways and——

"Ah! The Cupids!"

"Were you safe!?"

Thud-sliding-crash! Naga and I faceplanted onto the cobblestones and slid.

……Needless to say, the ones who had suddenly appeared at the street corner in our path were Marcus and Rachel.

"What is going on?"

"Who were those two just now?"

Apparently, they hadn't heard the conversation on the roof, as the two questioned us.

"……Well…… how should I put it…… those two just now are the ones trying to tear you apart…… understand?"

"What!?"

Marcus's complexion changed at my words.

"Then why didn't you chase them down and finish them off immediately!?"

"What are you talking about!? You guys were the ones who got in the way just now! *You guys!*"

"……But how foolish. Those two just now. Did they really think they could sever the deep feelings between Rachel and me with something like that?"

"Truly, Marcus. They must be pitiful people who cannot believe in fate or love."

Listen to what people are saying, you guys. I wanted to say that, but of course, there was no way such words would reach the ears of an idiot couple who had entered "Lovey-Dovey Mode."

However, those two——were they really hired by Marcus's father, Council Chairman Sandrit?

If that were the case, it would be unnatural for him to target his own son, Marcus, along with Rachel——but that is the opinion of someone who has never seen these two.

After observing them for a while, something inside me snapped; I wouldn't find it strange at all if he had sworn in his heart to finish off Rachel along with Marcus.

While I was thinking about various things like that, the two who had been talking things over walked up to us. Marcus put his hand on my shoulder, and Rachel put hers on Naga's.

"And so, Lina-san will be mine."

"And Naga-san will be mine."

"As our Bodyguard Cupids!"

"DON'T JUST DECIDE THAT!"

Naga and I harmonized our scream.

"Eh!?"

Rachel shrank back slightly at our shout.

"Then, would it be better if Lina-san was in charge of me and Naga-san was in charge of Marcus!?"

"That's not it! I'm saying I hate both options!"

At the words Naga screamed out of pure frustration, the idiot couple exchanged glances for a moment——

"——Ah!"

"I see!"

The two clapped their hands and harmonized their voices.

"In other words, it means that the two of us should never be apart for even a moment, right? ♪"

Completely ignoring the collapsed Naga, they took each other’s hands and gazed into each other’s eyes.

"If it’s the Cupid’s command, then it can’t be helped ♪ I’ll take the day off from work today and stay with Marcus forever."

"That’s right. Since the Cupid says it is fate, there’s nothing we can do."

Note: I didn't say that.

"I’ll take the day off from work today too, and be with you, Rachel, forever and ever."

"My. It looks like it’s going to be a wonderful day, Marcus."

"Of course, Rachel."

"Ufufufufu ♪"

"Ahahahaha ♪"

Idiot couples——

How powerless are human beings against such an existence?

Standing right next to the fallen Naga, I stood there perfectly still, thinking about such things.

"Ahahaha ♪ Wait for me ♪ Rachel."

"Ufufufufu, try and catch me, Marcus."

A short while later——

At a lakeshore slightly removed from the city.

While catching glimpses of Marcus and Rachel starting a game of tag out of the corner of my eye, Naga and I were collapsed on the sandy beach, halfway buried.

"Look, I caught you! ♪"

"Kyan! Geez, Marcus. Well then, one more time. There!"

"Ah. That’s cheating, Rachel. Wait up! ♪"

——The eleventh time——

Some detached part of my mind counted the number of times they had played tag almost unconsciously.

……Ah…… I’m sure we’re just going to rot away like this. Both of us……

Just as my heart was filled with such resigned thoughts, like a perfectly still lake surface——

KABOOM! A single strike of attack magic shattered it.

Crimson flames danced wildly, and the resulting shockwave shook the surface of the lake.

The flames licked across the very earth where we had been buried until just a moment ago.

"……Y-you guys!?"

Marcus let out a startled cry.

He was looking toward two shadows, one large and one small, standing at the edge of the forest.

Gilmezia. And Lulogue.

"I know you're safe."

Lulogue's voice drifted over the wind crossing the lake.

"You aren't so soft as to take a direct hit from that strike, are you? Stop pretending to be dead and come out."

"……Good grief…… it seems finally……"

"We can do something decent."

The blowing wind scattered the dancing smoke, revealing the figures of Naga and me standing there.

Of course, it goes without saying that I had sensed the presence and avoided that last strike just in time.

"So? I want to ask——your original goal was supposed to be tearing Marcus and Rachel apart. Why did you suddenly attack us?"

"It's obvious. Lina Inverse. It's about you. There is no doubt you are plotting something using us. However, I refuse to be used for your convenience. Therefore, I will defeat you first. If I do that, it won't matter what you were plotting. That is what it comes down to."

"Wait a minute! Why does it turn into that logic!?"

……And then…… after saying that, I reconsidered.

At the very least, it was a fact that dealing with these guys was mentally easier than hanging around Marcus and his girlfriend.

In that case!

There was a plan: I could beat these guys down quickly, make up some excuse like "With this, our job is finished," and escape the city.

"……Even if I say that, you won't be convinced anyway, will you. Fine. In that case, I'll take you on!"

"Hmph! I'll make you regret looking down on Naga the White Serpent!"

Perhaps thinking it was better than watching the idiot couple, Naga also got excited and stood up.

"……Naga? Never heard of her."

Gilmezia's muffled mumble.

"A disciple of Lina's, perhaps?"

"WHO'S A DISCIPLE!? WHO!?"

I'd hate it too. A disciple like this.

Lulogue scoffed at the angry Naga.

"No doubt your method is to use those looks to seduce the man and break them up…… but this industry isn't so soft that such a crude plan would work. Even if you are Lina Inverse's disciple…… it seems your depth is quite shallow after all."

"……Hmph. I don't know what kind of nonsense you're talking about, but if you're going to talk that big, I'll have to see it for myself! Your so-called strength!"

With that, Naga chanted a spell——

"Ice Arrow!"

She barked and released an arrow of cold air, but the two assassins jumped and avoided it easily.

"Fireball!"

Lulogue's counterattack came without a moment's delay.

Of course, Naga and I weren't the type to be hit by something like that. This level of spell exchange was an everyday occurrence for us.

The explosion happened behind us as we dodged easily.

"——Tch!"

Lulogue let out a click of his tongue.

——But.

This could be used.

Naga and I exchanged glances. Apparently, we were thinking the same thing.

The two of us dashed across the ground, releasing one simple spell after another.

The two assassins continued to dodge.

"If this is all you've got! Your techniques lack variety!"

Lulogue threw a mocking laugh at us.

Naturally.

After all, we were intentionally continuing to release simple spells that were easy to dodge.

And then, while repeating our movements, offense, and defense, the moment arrived.

"——Got you!"

Gilmezia let out a cry of joy.

In Lulogue's hand was the magical light of a spell that was already complete.

"If you dodge, you'll hit those two behind you!"

Yes. Right behind us were the two who were still flirting in the middle of this situation!

"Fireball!"

Along with the "Words of Power," Lulogue released a sphere of light!

Naga and I dodged without hesitation!

BOOM! Flame and thunder erupted behind us!

Alright!

Clap! The two of us struck our hands together!

We had made an effort to protect the two of them, but our power fell short and the idiot couple perished…… I mean, the two beloved ones had fallen.

It was a truly beautiful composition.

"Wait, you guys! Just now……!?"

To Gilmezia, who was starting to say something, Naga and I said while rubbing our eyes,

"Oh no. Marcus and Rachel are in terrible trouble."

"How could you do such a horrible thing."

"You're being incredibly monotone……"

Lulogue muttered in exasperation.

I pointed *sharply* at the assassins.

"Anyway! Thank you——no, I mean… how dare you do that to those two!"

"——Are you alright? Rachel?"

Snap! At that moment.

The battlefield froze at the sound of a voice from behind.

"Yes ♪ Because you protected me in an instant. Kyah. More importantly, are you okay? Marcus? I was so worried……"

"Ahahaha. Don't be silly, Rachel. There's no way I would let you worry. Surely, God protected us because we love each other."

"Ah, then this truly is——"

"A miracle of love."

……Um…… they're alive. These guys.

We were completely frozen. The two assassins were no exception.

"Marcus."

"Rachel."

While listening to their sickly sweet voices behind us for a while——

"……W-we're withdrawing……"

"Yeah……"

Apparently, it had become too stupid to fight; Gilmezia answered the groaning Lulogue, and the assassins departed into the depths of the trees growing nearby.

Of course, there was no way Naga and I had enough energy left to chase after them……

"By the way…… what on earth happened, Cupids? You look like you're in bad shape."

"……I *am* in bad shape……"

I muttered while still collapsed.

After the assassins had left.

Rachel had called out to us only after she had finished flirting with Marcus to her heart's content.

"What is really wrong!? It's a problem if you're like that! Honestly, what do you think you're here for as Cupids!?"

"……Hey……"

My voice was weak as I tried to point out Marcus's outrageous statement.

"……I don't know…… if someone attacks, you should just drive them away with your 'Miracle of Love' or whatever……"

To Naga, who was also speaking half-heartedly, Rachel said with a troubled face,

"……I think that might be possible…… but if we do that, the time for us to nurture our love will be cut short……"

"……Oh, yeah, yeah, is that so……"

"We're in trouble, Marcus."

"We're in trouble, Rachel."

……If…… if it’s come to this, there’s no helping it.

I slowly raised my body.

"……I’ll strike the mastermind…… and make them stop the harassment…… You won't have any complaints then, right?"

"EH!?"

At my words, the idiot couple and Naga all raised their voices.

"……W-wait a minute, Lina! Did you know the mastermind’s true identity!?"

"I just have an idea…… although I think it’s quite certain……"

Needless to say. It was Marcus’s father, Council Chairman Sandrit.

……I didn't really want to do this because it would lower my trust and reputation with the Sorcerers' Association…… but it was better than being constantly bombarded by the idiot couple and rotting away buried in the sand.

I’d make the father and son face off and let them settle it!

"And so! Let’s go, everyone! To the Prociam City Sorcerers' Association!"

"……The showdown at last…… Marcus…… I’m…… a little bit scared……"

"Ah…… Rachel…… you’re trembling so much…… you poor thing…… but it’s alright. Because——I’ll always be by your side."

"Ufufufu ♪ That’s right, M-a-r-c-u-s."

……Um…… for now…… I’d like you to stop draining my willpower from behind…… even without that, this is hard enough……

While pointing toward the city, I desperately held myself back from collapsing……

"……W-what is the meaning of this, Lina-kun!?"

Before long. In the Council Chairman’s office at the Sorcerers' Association.

Facing the four of us, the Chairman raised a voice of agitation.

……Well, from his perspective, I, who was supposed to have taken the request to split Marcus and Rachel apart, had suddenly arrived with the two of them in tow. It was only natural for him to be agitated.

And his son, Marcus, also raised a voice of agitation from behind me.

"T-that’s right! When greeting the other person’s parents, normally the man is supposed to go first!?"

"WHO IS TALKING ABOUT THE ORDER OF GREETINGS!?"

With that, I pointed *sharply* at the Chairman.

"I’m saying that you, his father——the Chairman, are the very person who hired those two assassins!"

"……Wh-……!?"

Several voices overlapped.

I pressed in close to the frozen Chairman.

"Lulogue and Gilmezia. Do those names ring a bell?"

"——That is——!?"

"They do, don't they."

"Father!"

To Marcus and me, the Chairman said in a panic,

"Wait! Does that mean…… those two actually appeared!?"

"It’s no use playing dumb. Even if you say you don't know those people now……"

"I said I only know the names!"

The Chairman said with a bewildered face.

"Lina-kun, I told you, didn't I? I conducted a thorough investigation into the experts in that field. Among those that came up at that time were the names of Lulogue and Gilmezia."

"……And so, you requested those two to split up your son and Rachel."

"I did not! It is true those two are renowned experts in the relationship-breaking industry, but even so, they are no match for you, Lina-kun, who is at the top level of the industry. Having requested you, I would not be so rude as to also hire two people of lower rank."

"……Requested you……!"

"Could it be, Lina-san……!"

Marcus and Rachel raised voices of astonishment.

I didn't intend to take such a request, but it was a fact that the Chairman had brought the topic to me. It was no wonder the two of them, who had assumed I was acting as Cupid, were surprised.

"……Then…… at first you intended to tear us apart……!"

"But…… while traveling with us……!"

"You were struck by the strength of our love and had a change of heart, right?"

"Is that so!?"

"DON'T BELIEVE IT!"

The Chairman shouted. I shouted back.

"I! From the beginning, had no intention of tearing you apart or bringing you together! Or rather, I'm just fed up with everything already!"

"Lina-kun. It's a problem if you suddenly start being so selfish."

"That's right! Think about the trouble you're causing those around you!"

"I've been saying it from the start and it's not selfish, and you guys are the ones who should think about the trouble you're causing others!"

I barked, breathing heavily through my shoulders——

Naga's hand *patted* my shoulder.

"Hey. Calm down a little, Lina."

Ugh. And of all people, I'm being reasoned with by Naga.

"Anyway, to summarize——"

Naga held up one finger and looked around at everyone.

"Lina is trying to quit the relationship-breaking industry. Everything fine so far?"

"YOU'RE ALREADY WRONG THERE! I have no memory of ever entering such a suspicious industry!"

"What I just heard…… cannot be ignored."

A muffled-sounding statement was suddenly heard from out of nowhere.

This voice——

"Lulogue!?"

"To call our proud relationship-breaking industry 'suspicious' is the ultimate insult."

This time, it was Gilmezia’s voice.

Wait, is it a proud business? Relationship-breaking.

The voices sounded close. However, there was no sign of anyone outside the window, and in the room, besides the five of us, there was a desk and a closet…… a closet?

Bang! The door was kicked open with a loud noise.

Needless to say, the pair of Lulogue and Gilmezia jumped out.

I sent a quiet look toward the Chairman.

"——Council Chairman Sandrit——you just said you didn't hire them…… then why are these two here?"

"I-I don't know!"

"That’s right. He is unrelated. Although I cannot reveal the true client."

Lulogue spoke.

"We heard what you said by the lake. That you were going to the city’s Sorcerers' Association. In that case, we figured you would go to Marcus’s father——the Chairman, and we simply beat you here."

"I-is that so!"

The Chairman glared at the two.

"Then those two masked cleaning staff from earlier…… that was you!"

"DIDN’T YOU THINK THAT WAS SUSPICIOUS?!"

"No. I did think it was suspicious. They went into the closet and never came out."

"……Um…… Y’know what... Never mind."

I gave up on all the things I wanted to say and turned back toward the assassins.

If the client isn't the Chairman, then who? If you're talking about someone who finds the existence of the idiot couple offensive……

……The entire human race?

Too many suspects. No good.

If it’s come to this, I’ll force a conclusion and end it!

I pointed *sharply* at Lulogue and his partner.

"The fact that you’ve come this far means…… you finally intend to settle this! In that case, how about the loser of this match withdraws?"

"……Very well……"

"Lulogue!?"

To Gilmezia, who was raising a voice of protest, Lulogue said,

"Unless we go in with that much resolve, there will be no victory. You understand that, don't you?"

"……Understood."

Meanwhile, I whispered into Naga's ear.

"……Just one more push. If we settle this, we're off the hook."

"Hmph. I know."

Lina, Naga, and the two assassins faced off!

"……Um…… if possible, please do that kind of thing elsewhere……"

The Chairman was muttering something, but of course, we ignored it.

"Ice Spear!"

Lulogue released the first strike. But it wasn't aimed at us.

Clang! The thing that froze from the strike was the door to the room.

"You have lost, Lina Inverse!"

Lulogue's victory declaration rang out loudly.

"Now you cannot leave the room! If you use a large technique in this narrow space, you'll be caught in it yourself! In other words, I've practically sealed your techniques!"

Hmph! How naive!

"Naga! For now, chant Fireball! Don't fire it, just let it drift around appropriately!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

In response, Naga chanted a spell——

"Fireball!"

She created a sphere of light on her palm and let it drift into the air.

"A-are you insane!?"

Lulogue raised a voice of astonishment.

If this was touched, it would immediately burst into a massive explosion. It would scatter flames all over the room. Of course, in that case, I would be caught in it too.

I chanted a spell without worrying about it——

"Fireball!"

I created a sphere of light with the same spell.

"——And so. With this, if one explodes, the other will also explode massively."

"Wh-wh-what do you intend to do with such a thing!?"

To the panicked Lulogue, I gave a single wink.

"Like this."

With that, I *tossed* it out.

Amidst the rising screams and roars, I turned on my heel and dashed!

I grabbed the closet door and opened it——

"……I'm scared…… Marcus."

"I'm here, so it's alright. Rachel."

……There were people there already……

And then.

BOOM-CRASH-ROAR! A barrage of flames swallowed the room.

"……Phew…… I thought I was going to die."

I crawled out from under the desk only after the swirling flames had completely vanished.

My plan was to have the Fireballs burst and hide in the closet to wait out the flames…… I never expected the idiot couple to have occupied it first.

Deciding there was no time to drag the two of them out, I crawled under the desk and used the Chairman, who was nearby, as a lid.

Various things were scorched, but thanks to that, my damage was minimal.

"——Hey, Lina! What were you thinking!? To involve even me!"

As expected, Naga was the first to revive from the scorched mess and raise a voice of protest.

However, I remained calm and collected.

"Well then, let me ask you: which do you think is better, hanging around those two forever and living your life as a Cupid, or being caught in a spell and getting scorched?"

"Oh……! I-if that’s the case…… I’d rather…… be scorched……"

Naga fell silent, completely failing to notice my change of topic.

Hmph. Easy.

Anyway, with this——

"……Ugh……"

"T-to…… think that……"

I thought it was over, but at that moment.

The two assassins groaned and sat up!

"We cannot…… afford to lose……!"

Lulogue turned a sharp gaze toward me.

——This guy……!

In the moment I flinched.

Thud. Clatter. The scorched closet collapsed, and from within emerged Marcus and Rachel, still holding hands.

"Were you safe? Rachel."

"Of course, Marcus. Because you were by my side."

"That’s right. As long as the two of us are together……"

"No one can hurt us."

"Because the love between the two of us is immortal."

"……Kuh……!"

At the "knocked out babbling attack" of the idiot couple, the assassins finally fell to their knees.

Lulogue stared at the two.

"……Is the love between the two of you truly that strong……?"

"EH!?"

Naga and I both cried out at the suddenly off-target comment.

"Certainly. It is our loss."

"WHAAAAT!?"

Gilmezia, even you!?

The assassins stood up on the spot and looked back and forth between me and the

idiot couple.

"But don't misunderstand. We didn't lose to you."

"We lost to the depth of the love between those two."

"……I-is…… that so……?"

……C-could it be these guys…… were withdrawing after seeing the idiot couple not because they had lost their will to fight from the stupidity, but because they were actually moved in their hearts!?

"To think there was love this strong…… honestly…… I feel as if scales have fallen from my eyes…… In honor of those two, I shall tell you the client. It is the President of the Chamber of Commerce in this city. For the simple reason that the public morals of the city were being corrupted, that's all……"

No. I think that's a perfectly noble reason.

"……In that case…… I shall handle the discussion with him."

That was the Chairman!

No way! Even you!

"Marcus. Your father was wrong. To think your love was something so pure…… I feel as if my heart is truly being cleansed…… From now on, I shall acknowledge the two of you and walk together with you."

"Father……"

"Father-in-law……"

"……'Father-in-law', huh. Hmph. It's not a bad sound……"

The Chairman spoke with a distant look in his eyes.

Next to him, the two assassins said,

"……Hmph…… Gilmezia. Perhaps from now on, even we could get along a little better."

"That's right. There is no need to be ashamed of loving someone. These two taught us that."

"……Huh……?"

Before Naga and me, who had turned around and shouted, the scorched masks of the two assassins fell off.

Revealed underneath were the true faces of Lulogue, a short-haired beauty, and Gilmezia, who was handsome despite his sturdy build.

"……Um…… so does that mean, you guys……?"

"We are husband and wife."

"A workplace marriage, so to speak."

Gilmezia and Lulogue answered my question in turn.

A workplace marriage…… that's no good. The relationship-breaking industry.

The two took each other's hands.

"Lulogue…… no, Lu-chan. I feel as if until now, we've been all about work, work, and neglecting our communication with each other. From now on, let's cherish our time together more."

"I'm happy to hear you say that…… Let's also nurture our love so that we don't lose to those two, Gilmezia…… no, Gil-pyon."

"Lu-chan ♪"

"Gil-pyon ♪"

……H-h-h……

Why are there *more* idiot couples now!

"——Thank you very much. Cupids."

It was Marcus who called out to Naga and me, who were standing there with our hair practically turning white.

Of course, Rachel was by his side.

"With this, everything has been settled peacefully."

"It's all thanks to you."

"And so, since our business is finished, you can go home now."

……Ah…… is that so……

Naga and I walked listlessly, passed through the door that had been blown away by the spell earlier, turned around, and——

"HAVE A FIREBALL, YOU IDIOTS!"

KABOOM! We slammed a strike of our heart and soul into the room——

——Looking back——

I feel as if I learned various things from this incident.

The fact that true love is infinitely strong.

But also the feeling that it's somehow a *wrong* kind of strength.

At any rate.

Naga and I left Prociam City with a somehow unpleasant aftertaste in our hearts……

(Love is Strong: It’s finally over, man)

Lunatic Festival

I was sitting quietly in an orange space lit by a small light.

From outside, the sound of heroic drums could be heard, vibrating through the night air.

——Once in a while——this kind of thing might be nice.

Dressed in a white gown, I suddenly thought that with a peaceful feeling.

Tonight——was the night of a festival.

"Participate in a festival?"

When I first heard that story, I couldn't help but ask back.

Tehsimo Village, located in the mountains.

It wasn't a village with a very large population, but there was a branch of the Sorcerers' Association here.

Apparently, a branch had been established because some wild herbs that could only be picked in this area during a certain season became materials for sorcery.

And so, I visited the Association to give my greetings, and the thinning-haired Chairman requested me to——participate in the festival.

The Chairman nodded at me as I repeated his words.

"Yes. This village——as you can see, is still quite rural. Old customs and anachronistic prejudices still remain. In other words——that is to say. Here, the mistrust toward sorcerers is still strong."

I see. It’s true that even in large cities, prejudices against sorcerers exist. If it’s a closed-off village, it’s no surprise that it would be strong.

"However, that will cause obstacles in our activities. Therefore, to promote interaction with the villagers, we decided to fully cooperate in the annual harvest festival. However——well. The girl who was promised by the Association to ride on the portable shrine has come down with a cold. If I explain the situation, I’m sure they would understand, but that wouldn't exactly foster friendship. Just as I was wondering what to do——Lina-dono, you arrived."

"I see."

"I have heard various rumors about you, Lina-dono, but if you just sit still, you look like a harmless, cute girl. There should be no problem."

"……'Look like a harmless'…… you say……"

At my half-lidded eyes, the Chairman hurriedly waved his hands.

"——Ah——no, no. That’s right, of course, since I’m taking up your time, I will provide a small reward. All you have to do is sit on the shrine. Don't do anything extra——no, don't do anything else——no, you don't have to do anything else——

What do you think? Will you accept?"

"……Hmm……"

There were a few things that bothered me about the Chairman’s way of speaking, but participating in a festival and getting paid just for sitting? The conditions weren't bad.

And so——

I accepted the request, dressed in a white gown, and was carried on a portable shrine in the village square toward the festival grounds, where the shrine dedicated to the god was located.

The sound of the drums heard through the gaps in the bamboo blinds covering all four sides grew louder and louder——

Thump! With a particularly loud sound, the drums stopped, and at the same time, the shrine came to a sudden halt.

We had arrived. At the festival grounds.

I repeated the procedure I had heard beforehand in my mind.

The blinds of the shrine would be opened, and amidst the villagers watching, I, acting as the spirit protecting the village, would descend from the shrine, circle around the statue of the harvest god three times, and then kiss the god’s cheek——

After that, it was supposed to be a noisy party with drinking and singing.

Before long, following the procedure, the front blind was lifted, and I saw the festival grounds for the first time.

In front of a statue with bat wings, horns, six arms, and a single eyeball, was a crowd of people wearing triangular hoods with only holes for the eyes, holding a scimitar in one hand and a torch in the other!

Dondoko-dokodoko-dondoko-dokodoko! And once again, the eerie sound of the drums began to play!

……

Do……

"DOHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!"

……*BOOM*……

CRASH-BOOM-ROAR……

——That day——

On the side of a certain mountain, sparks from attack spells flashed one after another.

Bang! "WHAT ON EARTH IS THE MEANING OF THIS!?"

The very next day after I had unceremoniously pulverized that suspicious gathering.

I stormed into the Chairman’s office as soon as the Sorcerers' Association opened for business.

At the intensity of my words as I slammed my hands on the desk, the Chairman shrank back.

"……Wh-……!? What’s this all of a sudden? Is there some problem……?"

"IT’S NOT 'IS THERE SOME PROBLEM'! WHAT KIND OF FESTIVAL WAS THAT! THAT THING YESTERDAY!"

"……I heard it was…… a prayer for a bountiful harvest……"

He muttered with a bewildered expression, sounding unsure of himself.

He didn't look like he was playing dumb, but even if he didn't know, the crime of making a young maiden participate in such a suspicious ritual was punishable by ten thousand deaths.

With a twitch at my temple, I opened my mouth to speak——

"What is the meaning of this!? That thing!?"

However, it wasn't me who spoke.

Turning toward the voice, I saw the figure of a man standing defiantly behind me, the door to the room flung open, with a look of fury on his face.

He looked to be around thirty. Average build, average height, average features—the kind of completely unremarkable middle-aged guy you’d pass on the street and forget before he’d even gone ten paces. This "Old Man" stomped right across the room, ignoring me entirely. He glared at the Council Chairman and barked, "You talk about 'fostering friendship,' but that person you sent made a total mess of yesterday’s festival! Should I take that as a declaration of war against this village!?" He ranted at the Chairman, who was looking completely overwhelmed.

...Wait. Yesterday’s festival...? "Hey! Old Man!" I called out. He threw a sharp glance my way and snapped, "Later! I'm in the middle of something

import—...Agh!?" He shrieked, whipping his head back toward me. "You! From yesterday!?" He recognized my face. "That means... you! You must be the one in charge of yesterday's disaster!" I took a step back, putting some distance between us as we squared off.

"I knew it! How dare you ruin our long-awaited festival like that!" he shouted. "Shut up!" I yelled back. "A ritual that purely evil deserves to be crushed without hesitation—for the good of the world and everyone in it!" He looked stunned. "...Evil!? A ritual!? What was evil about it!?" I couldn't help but scream at his complete lack of self-awareness. "All of it! Every single bit!"

"What are you talking about? No matter how you look at it, that was a proper harvest festival following formal traditions!" he insisted. "Liar!" I shrieked. "First of all, what was with that ridiculously suspicious statue!? Where exactly was the 'prayer for a good harvest' hidden in that thing!?"

"There's nothing suspicious about it! It's full of meaning! The wings symbolize the blessings of heaven, and the six arms represent diligence and labor! The single eye means dedicating oneself to one thing—farming—and the horn is meant to ward off disasters, crop diseases, and pests!"

"Like I'd buy that nonsense! Then why were the villagers wearing those creepy triangular hoods with only the eyes cut out, carrying scimitars in one hand!?"

"By hiding the face—killing the individual—they pray for the prosperity and harvest of the whole region! The scimitar is a declaration of intent: 'We won't just rely on God to fight disasters and pests; we will work together and put in the effort ourselves!'"

"Ugh, you have an answer for everything! But no matter how you spin it, a bunch of masked creeps gathered with swords in front of a weird statue is not a normal festival! It went past 'shady' and was just plain terrifying!"

"Silence! ...I mean, sure, when everyone gathered in front of the statue with torches, it was so visually terrifying that everyone was shaking in their boots... but don't bring that up!" So he *had* been worried about it.

"Anyway!" he continued. "We followed the instructions of an advisor who came from the city. Everything was done according to the proper rites! A rank amateur like you has no right to complain about our festival! Especially not after you went and ruined it..."

"Hold it right there," I interrupted. "Instructions from an advisor? What's that about?"

"Just what I said. Someone came from the city about six months ago and taught us the proper way to hold a harvest festival. We took them on as an advisor and conducted yesterday's festival according to the formal rites they dictated! And

you..."

"...You're being scammed. Absolutely," I muttered. He froze for a moment at my words. "—T-That's impossible!"

"You just froze, didn't you?" I pointed out. "S-Shut up! You might not know this, but that person was a priest in Seirune, the famous City of White Magic!"

"Oh... really? A 'priest' from the 'City of White Magic' that worships the Red Dragon God, and yet, for some reason, they're an expert on harvest festivals? That person?"

"Mmm..." The man crossed his arms with a troubled expression. "Thinking about it that way... there are a few things that don't quite add up..."

"A *few* things!?" I screamed. "Didn't you think something was off the moment you saw that statue? It looked like nothing but an idol for an evil god!"

"Well, it was explained to us that 'God is something that transcends our common sense, so it might appear strange to human eyes'..."

"It's *too* strange!" I yelled instinctively. "Mmm... no... but... I was also told that our common sense and values aren't necessarily the Truth..."

"That might be true, but 'Truth' is called 'Truth' because it looks right to anyone! Which part of that statue or ritual looked right to you?"

"U-Ummm... when you put it that way... I'm starting to feel like I might have been scammed a little..."

"You were blatantly scammed! Blatantly!" Honestly... this is what happens with people who don't think with their own brains and just swallow whatever they're told.

"But then... why would he bother tricking us?"

"How should I know?"

"Hmph..." The man went silent for a while, looking troubled. "...It's true that your words have some merit. But honestly, I'm still half-doubting both sides." Still half-doubting? Give me a break.

He looked me straight in the eye with a gaze full of resolve. "If you're right, will you come with me to see him? I want to determine if he was tricking us, or if you're just making up excuses for wrecking the festival. I want to hear both stories at once and see for myself who is right."

...Determining the truth? Probably impossible with those eyes of yours... I thought about saying it, but if I did, he'd probably just get angry and claim I was lying. Besides, rather than moping around here, it seemed faster to go knock around the person who deluded the villagers and make them admit it was a lie. ...Well... it

probably won't lead to any money... but it'd be annoying to keep being seen as 'the woman who ruined the festival.'

"Fine. Let's go see this guy right now."

"Right." We both nodded, turned on our heels—and then a voice called out to our backs. "H-Hey..." We turned to see the Council Chairman still sitting there, looking lost. He gave us a sulky look. "...For now... I haven't heard the explanation of the situation at all..."

"Ah." The old man and I spoke in unison.

"This is it." The man—whose name was Krevil, the festival committee chairman—stopped in front of a house on the outskirts of the village. I realized we hadn't even introduced ourselves, so we'd exchanged names on the way here. And this was where the problematic self-proclaimed advisor, a guy named Lagastein, lived.

...However... I stood there, frowning at the sight of it. The place looked decades—maybe even a century—old. The stone walls were stained black with soot, and the ivy crawling up the sides had withered into a dry brown. It felt as though the building itself was leaning over us. Most of the windows were closed with old wooden blinds, and the ones that were open were draped with heavy, dusty yellow-gray curtains. To top it off, a flock of crows was perched in the dead trees nearby, cawing.

...Was it my imagination, or was the sky only gloomy right above this house...? "It's like... an all-out assault of suspiciousness..."

"Well, it's an old house. Until about ten years ago, a family of landlords lived here for generations. It happened to be vacant, so Mr. Lagastein moved in."

"By the way... what happened to those previous landlords?" To my question, Krevil scratched his head. "Well, they all dropped dead from an unknown illness." Tear it down. Tear this house down.

"Anyway, let's go." Without a hint of concern for the house's grim appearance or past, Krevil walked toward the entrance. I really didn't want to go in, but standing around wasn't going to get us anywhere. I steeled my resolve and followed him at a slight distance. Of course, there was a high chance Krevil was actually the enemy. Maybe he'd tried to sacrifice me to some weird ritual, but since I fought back and escaped, he was now luring me into a trap with a lame lie... the logic held up. ...Though it was just as likely he was just a guy who didn't think about anything...

"Hey! Mr. Lagastein!" Krevil called out, knocking on the door knocker shaped like a beast's skull. There was a moment of silence—only the sound of crows and the wind. Just as Krevil reached for the knocker again, a low, faint male voice came from behind the door. "...The door is not locked... come in..."

"Excuse us," Krevil said, placing his hand on the door. *Creeeeeak*... The door groaned and swung inward. Inside was a hall submerged in darkness. The faint strips of light leaking through the blinds only served to emphasize the gloom. The carpet on the floor had probably been bright red once, but it had absorbed years of grime until it was the color of dried blood. There was a portrait of a woman on the wall and a suit of armor in the corner. Honestly, when things are this overtly suspicious, there are too many things to point out, so I didn't even bother.

"Mr. Lagastein!?" After a brief pause, a figure emerged from the depths of the darkness, making almost no sound on the carpet. Age-wise—he was probably actually quite young. But his sickly complexion and hollow cheeks made him look like an old man. His robe and hood were a faded gray, and from beneath the deep hood, a dark gaze and messy, reddish-brown hair peeked out. *Clink*... The ornaments he wore, made of animal bones and stones, made a small sound.

"What... do you want?" the man whispered in a low, gloomy voice. This guy was Lagastein? In that instant—*Wham!* "Oof!?" My high-jump heel drop slammed into Krevil's head!

"Wh...!? What was that for!?" Krevil cried, clutching his head. "What do you mean 'what was that for'!?" I pointed at Lagastein and screamed, "What on earth were you thinking, trusting someone this incredibly suspicious!?"

"B-But he said he was from the big city, and that he used to be a priest in Seirune...!"

"You're the type of person who'd get totally ripped off by fake brand-name goods, aren't you?"

"H-How did you know!?" I knew it. There are always people like that—the type who get completely fooled by authoritative titles or place names and trust the person instantly. It looked like the whole village was made of people like that...

"Listen! Why would you blindly believe someone who looks this shady!?"

"W-What are you saying!? Don't tell me your parents never taught you 'don't judge a book by its cover'!?"

"There's a limit to that!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. Dammit... it made me furious to think I was being weighed on the same scale of trust as this creep. "Besides! Even the teachings of the Red Dragon God say: 'Between a cute girl and a suspicious-looking guy, believe the cute girl!'"

"R-Really!?" Krevil gasped. ...Wait, if he actually believes *that*, it's its own kind of problem...

"Kekekeke... don't make me laugh... there is no god who would spread such a ridiculous teaching..." From the side, Lagastein interjected with a perfectly

reasonable opinion. He flapped his robe. "Believe in me! Without doubt! My voice is the word of God!"

...That's no good either. Krevil looked agonized. "Actually, this young lady stopped last night's festival... and says the way we were doing it was wrong. Honestly, I'm torn. Mr. Lagastein, I don't know whose words are true—yours or hers..."

Honestly, once a person starts believing someone who says 'my words are the word of God,' they're finished as a human being... but I decided to keep that to myself for now. Lagastein turned his eyes toward me, his lips curling into a smirk. "...Young lady... it seems there is some misunderstanding. A common mistake, I'm sure. To begin with, that statue and the costumes each have a meaning..."

"I heard it already from this guy. The blessings of heaven and warding off disease... but no matter how you spin it, that looked like nothing but a sacrificial ritual for an evil god."

"...Guh...! To dismiss my theoretical defense with a single word...!"

"...Well... I don't think that level of suspiciousness is something you can fix with a 'theoretical defense'..."

"...Tch...! It can't be helped! Since words won't work, I must show mercy by delivering punishment and demanding repentance!"

"...Don't you usually call that 'shutting someone up by force'?"

"Silence!" *Snap!* Lagastein snapped his fingers, and a section of the wall behind him swung open. A secret door! Standing behind it were about ten people dressed in the outfits from last night—triangular hoods with eye holes, robes, and scimitars!

Among them, one person dressed in a different, black costume stepped forward. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! To ruin a perfectly good festival and then come back to complain, you certainly have some nerve!" ...Wait. The figure put her hands on her hips, thrusting out an annoyingly large chest from beneath her robe. "Howeeeeever! Your luck has run out, for I am here—the Anonymous Ma—...no! The Anonymous Mage!"

...So... what are you doing in a place like this now? Naga?

Twitch! At my words, Naga visibly froze for a second. "...F-Fufu! I have no idea what you're talking about, Lina Inverse! Since I said I'm anonymous, you should show a little tact!"

"Well... whatever, I guess..." As I scratched my head, Krevil leaned in. "Do you know her?"

"I have no idea who she is," I said flatly. I turned my gaze back to the "Mystery Person." "So? Mystery Person, why are you siding with a creep like this this time?"

"Hmph! Calling him a 'creep' shows how narrow-minded you are! It's only natural for customs and festival styles to vary by region! Haven't you heard the saying, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do'?"

I slumped my shoulders. "...I see. So you were also talked into his half-baked 'theoretical defense.' I get the gist of it... so just hurry up and come at me."

"Hmph! Then here we go, Lina! Get her, everyone!"

"Yes, ma'am!" At the Mystery Person's command, the mob of triangular-hooded people brandished their scimitars and dashed toward me!

Fine! If that's the tactic you're taking! I immediately began chanting a spell under my breath. The mob closed in—I was a split second faster.

"Dill Brand!" The Mystery Person unleashed her spell—

"Levitation!" —just as I released mine.

The Mystery Person had cast a spell that explosively released wind to blow everything away—a wide-area, indiscriminate attack. Her plan was to use the grunts to stop me and then blow us all away together. In contrast, I had cast a spell to simply create a strong gust of wind. It was the kind of wind that might blow a child away if they were holding an umbrella, but that was about it. It had no lethal power; at most, it would halt the enemy's movements for a moment.

But of course, I had no intention of defeating them with that. I had modified the spell slightly to change the direction of the wind. Specifically—from in front of me, toward my back. *Whoosh!* At the same time, I kicked off the floor and rode the wind I'd created, flying backward toward the open door! I zoomed through the entrance at high speed and took a large leap to the side as I landed.

In that instant, *Boom!* The Mystery Person's (ugh, this is a pain!) spell exploded inside the building. The blast caught the mob of triangular hoods and sent them tumbling out the front door one after another. I'd read her plan and made an emergency exit from the building. With that, almost everyone should be taken care of with zero effort. ...I had a feeling Krevil got caught in it too, but hey, that's fate.

Now, what happened to the others? I looked toward the entrance—

"Wha—!? What is this!?" A shocked voice suddenly came from behind me. I turned to find about ten villagers standing there, stunned. Who are they...? Before I could ask, one of them pointed at me and yelled, "A-Aah! This woman! It's the woman from yesterday!"

"What!?"

"You!?" They shouted one after another, looking at me with a mix of fear and anger. These must be the villagers who went to protest after Krevil and I left the council.

They probably heard from the Chairman that we'd come here and ran into this mess... this is bad! If I leave them like this, they'll get worked up and attack me for sure! In that case!

"Perfect timing. I'm just about to take down the person who was tricking you all."

"...Tricking us...?" Confusion spread across the faces of the residents. "Exactly. As soon as I came here with Mr. Krevil to talk, we were attacked without hesitation! Because of that, Mr. Krevil..." I trailed off and looked away. That should be enough to stir up all sorts of dark imaginations in their heads.

"No... way...?" The villagers turned pale, just as I'd planned. Good! Now, no matter what happens, Lagastein is the villain! I shouted toward the entrance, "Come out, Lagastein! I'm going to expose your big lies right in front of the villagers!" Of course, there was a high chance he'd been knocked out by the Mystery Person's blast, but that would be fine too.

—Or so I thought. "...Stop shouting... little girl..." The darkness behind the open door seemed to flicker for a moment, and out stepped a figure in a faded robe! It was none other than the third-rate scammer, Lagastein!

With the villagers watching from a distance, Lagastein and I faced off in the wind. *Swoosh*... The tall weeds rustled. "Your ambitions end here, Lagastein!" I pointed a finger at him and raised my voice. "You thought you could trick the villagers and make them do your bidding, but I won't let that happen!"

"Kekeke... what are you..."

"Ordering your subordinates to attack Mr. Krevil and me out of nowhere is the ultimate proof!" I cut him off. By emphasizing that Krevil was attacked too and that his methods were cowardly, I was winning the villagers over to my side without letting him argue. "The villagers have already figured it out! They know you were tricking them! So no matter what excuses you make now, it's useless! Just give it up!"

As I kept pressing him, he went silent— "...Kuh..." His shoulders trembled slightly. He was laughing. "...Kuh... kuh-kuh-kuh... it seems you are right. It looks like this is the end of the line..."

"W-What do you mean!?" one of the villagers asked, clearly agitated. I mean, what do you *think* it means? You were being scammed.

"Don't you get it? Then I'll tell you! The claim that this Lagastein is a former priest from Seirune who presided over harvest festivals was a total lie!"

"Wh-Whaaaaaat!?" The villagers cried out in shock. ...Seriously, you guys...

"I am a worshiper of a god that is incompatible with you peasants! Calling it a

harvest festival was just a cover for a ritual for my god. I had a perfect plan to eventually make you all converts to our god and my comrades! If this woman hadn't come, I would have been just one step away..."

One step away with *that*? Before I could say anything, a familiar idiotic laugh rang out. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I've heard everything!"

"What!?" Lagastein cried out in surprise and turned around, stepping aside. Pushing past him with her chest out in a ridiculously arrogant manner, the Mystery Person emerged from the entrance, wearing her black pointed mask and robe!

"...Wh... who are you!?" As Lagastein faltered, the Mystery Person put her hands on her robe. "Hmph! Now is the time to reveal my true identity!" With those words, she ripped off her robe and mask!

"Oooooh!?" Both Lagastein and the villagers gasped in shock. Long black hair, pale skin. An incredibly revealing costume with a skull necklace! Spiked shoulder guards! Yes! She was the one and only, the outrageous, the "unburnable trash" herself—Naga the White Serpent!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems everyone is speechless at this unexpected turn of events! Which means you hadn't realized my true identity!" Naga boasted, her head held high, chest out, acting all superior.

"...Well... I think everyone is just surprised because your outfit is so incredibly weird... besides, the villagers don't even know who you are, identity or not."

"In any case, Lagastein!" Naga ignored my comment and pointed at the man beside her. "Now that your evil deeds are in the light, surrender quietly to me and let me confiscate your hoarded treasure!"

"Eh!? Treasure!?"

"...!?" As I shouted, Naga winced and looked away. "...W-What are you talking about, Lina? You must have misheard. Honestly, when your chest is small, your hearing goes too."

"What does my chest have to do with it!?" I yelled. "...I see... you either made a bunch of money doing something awful at your last place, or you embezzled the funds for the village festival... it's one of the two. Anyway! Lagastein! Either way, your ambitions are over! If you surrender quietly, you might escape a painful experience!"

I couldn't exactly say 'give me all your treasure' in front of the villagers, so I kept it civil. But it seemed that was enough to make Lagastein snap. "You little brats! Say whatever you want! Fine! Then I shall use my power to make you realize exactly who is going to have a 'painful experience'!"

He took a long step back and began chanting a spell! "An attack is coming! If you

don't want to get caught in it and die, run! As far as you can!"

"Waaaaah!?" The 'if you don't want to die' part worked perfectly; the villagers scrambled away in a panic. Good! Now, after I take down Lagastein, I can look for the treasure without anyone bothering me! I glared at Lagastein and began chanting a spell.

"Fire Arrow!" Lagastein fired the first shot. Five or six flaming arrows sped toward me! But thinking a measly attack like that could do anything to me was a fundamental mistake! I dodged easily and prepared a counterattack just as Naga's voice joined mine!

"Fireball!" Two glowing orbs were born and flew straight toward Lagastein! However, the mage's hands moved— *Ka-boom!* A second later, the fireballs Naga and I had launched exploded in mid-air!

Hoho! Knowing that a Fireball explodes upon contact with anything, he'd thrown something hidden in his sleeves to make them explode early!? He might not look like much, but he’s got some skill! Not the type to be underestimated!

"Freeze Arrow!" Lagastein jumped diagonally backward to avoid Naga's follow-up. His reflexes weren't bad either! Then the mage unleashed his next spell!

"Beast Howl!" Two rings of light appeared on the ground, and black figures rose from within them. A summoning spell! Two Lesser Demons appeared! "Kuhahaha! Do you see!? Do you know what these are!? Lesser Demons—in other words, monsters!" Lagastein laughed triumphantly. "Ordinary attacks won't work on these guys! After all..."

"Black Howl!" *Voom!* Before he could finish, the black magic I unleashed sent one of the newly summoned Lesser Demons into the depths of darkness.

".....!" Lagastein stood there, speechless. Of course, if a human had taken that hit, they'd be on a one-way trip to the afterlife.

"So? What's it going to be? I could have hit you directly with that last one. I'll say it again: if you surrender quietly, you won't have to experience any pain."

If Lagastein was as capable a mage as he seemed, he should know the terror of the spell I’d just used. I’d intended it as a threat, but taking out one of the Lesser Demons was killing two birds with one stone. "...I see... it seems I undecut merestimated you..."

"If you understand that—" But Lagastein off and gave an order to the remaining Lesser Demon! "Kill those women!" *Roar!* The Lesser Demon let out a cry, manifesting over a dozen Fire Arrows in front of it! At the same time, Lagastein retreated even further!

Then— "Elmekia Lance!" Naga's spell struck before the demon could fire its arrows,

shattering the remaining Lesser Demon!

At the same time, I lunged toward Lagastein! He probably intended to have the Lesser Demons buy time so he could take Naga and me down with a single high-level wide-area spell—but I wasn't going to let him! I'd knock him out before he had a chance to chant!

—But— the next moment, what came out of Lagastein's mouth wasn't a spell, but a call. "Come! According to the covenant bound by my soul! From the far-off northern lands, to this place! My ally, Ragiasone!"

Light erupted from the earth at Lagastein's voice! I jumped back in surprise. The light raced across the ground, tracing a pattern in the grass. An inverted pentagram pointing north. In the center of that pentagram, a black shadow slowly rose from the earth like a fountain.

It looked like that statue—the evil god statue from last night's festival. It had black, bat-like wings and six arms. A single twisted horn grew from the right side of its forehead. Its face looked human, but it had no right eye; instead, a single, abnormally large, bloodshot left eye glared at us.

Of course, there was no way this was a normal creature. It was different from a Lesser Demon or a Brass Demon. "...No... way..." I whispered in shock. It was an enemy I'd never seen before. But I could guess what it was.

"...That's..." Naga, who had come to my side without me noticing, whispered. A bead of sweat rolled down her cheek. "...A Pure Demon..."

"Demon" is a broad term, but there are many types and power levels. The ones that appear as wild demons or are summoned and used by second-rate mages are usually what we call "Sub-Demons," like Brass Demons or Lesser Demons. They're strong enough enemies for ordinary warriors or mages, but they can be wounded by normal weapons and aren't particularly bright.

However—the ones called "Pure Demons" are on an entirely different level. Normal weapons without magic don't work on them at all, and their attack and defense are leagues beyond Lesser or Brass Demons. Even though they're both called "Demons," the difference in their combat power is like that between a kitten and a tiger.pestle

—I'd heard that my sister back home once beat a Pure Demon with a rolling pin or a , but that was a complete exception to the rule.

"Oh? You figured out its true identity, did you?" Lagastein gave a small smirk at Naga's whisper. "That's right! The one I've contracted with in exchange for my soul is none other than Ragiasone! Don't think for a second he's anything like those Lesser Demons you just defeated! He is a pure demon, feared even by dragons! To stand before him means only one thing: death!"

"That's...!" I muttered, my voice trembling with shock. "How did someone whose only talent is tricking country folk with childish lies end up with a contract with a Pure Demon!?"

"...I mean, I'm more curious why someone with a contract with a Pure Demon is running such a small-scale, third-rate scam," Naga added with a perfectly calm tone.

"Why, you ask!? Hmph! You don't even understand that?" Lagastein flapped the hem of his robe. "By my contract with Ragiasone, I have gained immense power! But just because you get immense power doesn't mean your income suddenly increases or you become popular with the ladies! On the other hand, if I let him go on a rampage, assassins would be sent after me for sure! So! The only way is to work steadily and gain people's trust!"

A hollow wind seemed to blow at Lagastein's passionate speech. I pressed my finger to my temple. "...Ah... so basically... you vaguely wanted 'power' and contracted with a demon without thinking it through... and since you didn't know how to use it, you're just being a petty villain for now..."

"What do you mean, 'petty villain'!? I'm making my life easier for now, gaining allies and friends, and once I'm settled, I'll start doing bigger things! Can't you understand my noble ideals, you philistines!?"

"Nope, not at all."

"...I mean, which part of that is noble?"

"Right? Basically, you're just saying 'I want to make friends and live an easy life, and then do something big later'..."

"Hmph. You're much more of a philistine than we are."

"Yeah, philistine!" Naga and I took turns mocking him. Lagastein's face flushed with anger. "...Y-You...! To mock me so much! Fine, that's enough! Do it, Ragiasone! Kill them!"

"...Very well..." The demon, Ragiasone, answered in a muffled voice and began to walk slowly toward us. Lagastein scurried away, presumably to avoid getting caught in the crossfire. I wanted to go after him, but honestly, I didn't have the leeway for that with a Pure Demon in front of me.

"Watch out, Naga! Even if he's contracted to a petty villain, he's still a Pure Demon!"

"Hmph! I know that, Lina! Even if he's being used by a third-rate scammer, he's still a demon! I'm not going to let my guard down!"

"You brats! How dare you keep bringing that up!" Apparently, he *did* mind. The demon roared and swung his six arms! *Boom!* Six waves of magical energy were

born, three flying toward me and three toward Naga!

But his aim was sloppy! Naga and I jumped aside, easily avoiding the energy waves. We launched our counterattacks the moment we landed. I released the spell I'd been chanting.

"Ra Tilt!" Naga's voice overlapped with mine. Two spears of light were born, flying toward the demon with a slight delay! It was a spell that dealt direct damage to the target's spirit. A direct hit should leave even a Pure Demon wounded!

Whoosh! The demon's wings flapped, unfolding to protect its body. Naive! Even if they're wings, they're still part of a demon's body! A direct hit would still damage its spirit!

But—just before the spell hit, Ragiasone opened his black wings again. An afterimage of the wings remained in the air. *Crack-shatter!* The spells Naga and I had fired slammed into the afterimage and shattered with a sharp sound.

—What!? He left a magical afterimage in the air to use as a shield against our spells!? He's definitely got skill!

"Don't underestimate me!" The demon roared, swinging two of his hands. Again, he fired energy waves at us. But there was no way something that hadn't worked before would work now with fewer shots. We both jumped aside again, avoiding the hit easily.

—Having dodged, the two of us stood side by side.

——Could that really be—!?

At that same moment, the pure-blooded demon manifested a sphere of lightning at its chest and beat its twin wings!

WHOOSH! CRACKLE!

The lightning sphere shattered within the rising gale, transforming into a raging storm that hurtled toward Naga and me!

I knew it! That magical wave from its arm earlier had just been a feint to herd Naga and me into one spot!

Evasion was nearly impossible against a lightning storm covering such a wide area!

In that case, it was all or nothing!

I drew the short sword at my waist, signaling Naga to fall back with one hand while I plunged the blade deep into the ground with the other!

Simultaneously, I leaped backward—

And then, the storm of lightning screamed across the field!

BZZZT-CRACKLE-SNAP!

The cluster of brilliant white bolts let out a thunderous roar of exploding air and struck the short sword I had planted in the earth!

A split second later, the wind lashed against my body and blew past me toward the rear.

Alright, lucky!

Needless to say, the short sword had acted as a lightning rod to dissipate the strike, leaving me to face nothing but harmless wind.

Of course, this only worked because the demon had unleashed actual lightning. If that had been a bolt of pure magical energy shaped like lightning, a lightning rod wouldn't have done a thing to defend us.

Anyway, now it was my turn!

"Hungry Dragon Bite!" (*Garyuukou!*)

Following the "Words of Power" I chanted, my shadow cast upon the grass transformed into a grotesque shape and surged forward!

Despite being cast upon a sea of grass waving in the wind, it held the distinct, massive silhouette of a dragon.

It was a spell that summoned an illusionary dragon within one's own shadow to attack the opponent's shadow. Any damage dealt to the shadow would reflect directly onto the physical body.

"I told you that was naive!"

The demon roared and flashed one of its arms.

The resulting wave of magical energy acted like a giant scythe, reaping the grass in a wide arc!

It cut right through the shadow of the giant dragon crawling atop it.

With its neck severed, the shadow dragon vanished as if sinking into the undergrowth.

And there—

Naga’s resonant voice rang out!

"Then how about this!?

Chaos Dragon Roar!" (*Maryuukou!*)

In accordance with Naga’s "Words of Power," darkness gathered and solidified upon the grassland!

It took the form of a single, massive black dragon.

——The Demon King Dragon——

A dragon with dark scales said to be the strongest of its kind, residing only in the Kataart Mountains, the stronghold of the demons.

In terms of pure combat power, it even surpassed the Golden Dragons known as Dragon Kings.

Naga had summoned that very black demon dragon with her spell.

The massive black dragon’s body was etched with numerous scars, as if to prove the harshness of life in those demonic mountains.

"…Ngh…!"

A hint of agitation surfaced in Raugea Thorn’s voice.

Then—Naga pointed at the demon and gave the command to her dragon!

"Go! Dark Hollow Howl!" (*Ankyohai!*)

KUGAAAAAAAAAA!

Obeying the command, darkness was unleashed from the demon dragon’s maw toward the demon!

Raugea Thorn took a defensive stance and vanished into the darkness.

Then, abruptly—the wind blew.

The surrounding air was being sucked in.

Into the darkness released by the demon dragon.

Eventually, the dragon’s breath faded, and after the wind died down—

There stood the demon, unchanged!

——It didn't work!?

…Grrr… Gururururu…

The Demon King Dragon let out a low, threatening growl as it faced off against the winged demon—

"…That breath just now…

And those scars…

Ah! I knew it, you *are* John!"

With that, the demon lunged forward and firmly hugged the giant dragon’s leg.

…Wait, what?

"…I first met this fellow about fifty years ago…"

Raugea Thorn the demon sat right next to the Demon King Dragon, who was perched quietly.

Sitting primly in the formal *seiza* style on the grass, Raugea Thorn began to speak eloquently.

"…Uh-huh…"

Naga and I could only offer stunned, vacant acknowledgments.

"Back then, he was still just a child… but seeing him go wild in the village at the foot of the mountain, I took a liking to him instantly and wanted to keep him as a pet.

However, demons are forbidden from keeping pets in the Kataart Mountains…

So, I decided to hide him and raise him in the ruins of a deserted temple…"

I didn't know why, but even his tone of voice had completely changed.

"…This… sounds like it’s going to be a long story…"

"…Seems so…"

Naga and I whispered to each other.

With a distant look in his eyes, staring off at nothing in particular, the demon continued.

"For a while—the happy days continued.

We’d compete to see who could wither more of the forest with miasma, or go to the village at the foot of the mountain to see who could instill more terror without actually killing anyone…

That was how John and I nurtured our friendship…"

"What a terrible friendship…"

"Shh. He’ll hear you, Lina."

"Of course, it wasn't all good things.

Once, the fact that I was secretly keeping John was leaked to the other demons, and it became a major issue…

At that time, thanks to the mediation of Xelo*[1]… ah, you wouldn't know the name… a high-ranking demon, I was allowed to keep him.

That, too, is one of my wonderful memories."

---

[1] xellos

Please don't say "wonderful memories" while looking like that. I'm begging you. And if possible, stop with the "distant gaze" thing too.

"——However——"

Raugea Thorn's face clouded over and he lowered his eyes, speaking in a low voice.

"It was about twenty years ago.

The human armies suddenly launched an invasion of the Kataart Mountains—

Even those of us at the bottom of the hierarchy living in the mountains were called out to fight.

Along with my beloved John—"

"Yes, yes. Life is hard for those at the bottom in any world, isn't it?"

Standing beside me, Ragastain nodded with a tearful voice.

…Wait…?

For a moment, I had a powerful feeling that something was wrong, but before I could think too deeply on it, Raugea Thorn continued.

"In the midst of that battle, John and I became separated…

After the fighting ended, no matter how much I searched, I couldn't find a trace of him… I was certain he had died…

Having lost John, I became half-desperate…

I started doing things like being kind to people nearby, planting saplings on the mountain, picking up litter in the neighborhood… I led such a desolate, ruined life…"

Raugea Thorn spoke with a voice half-choked with tears.

…Is *that* what a "desolate life" looks like for a demon…?

"…But…! To think…!

To think we would be reunited in a place like this!"

Without any warning, he suddenly stood up, slid across the ground—*zuzazazaza!*—and appeared right in front of us. He grabbed Naga's hands with his six arms and squeezed them tight.

"Being able to reunite like this is all thanks to you!

——Truly——

Truly, thank you so much!"

"…Y-yeah… that’s nice for you…"

Naga gave a lukewarm response, leaning back slightly as the demon loomed close to her.

"…Ugh… what a beautiful story…"

Ragastain, perhaps having had a similar experience, was weeping nearby.

The sense of wrongness in my chest only grew stronger.

The demon walked back to the Demon King Dragon.

"——At any rate, now that I have safely reunited with John, I think we’ll go back to living together in the Kataart Mountains.

Truly, thank you for everything."

GUOOON.

The dragon let out a roar, and together they gave a polite little bow. They were wrapped in a sudden burst of darkness, and once the vortex vanished, the demon and the dragon were gone.

"…I see… they went back to the mountains together."

Ragastain gazed toward the far northern sky with a distant look.

There was a brief silence—

"——Wait, HUH!? Then what happens to my position!?"

"You don't have one."

"Completely gone."

Naga and I had finally snapped back to our senses, and we shot back at the sorcerer without a moment's delay.

Ragastain panicked, leaped away to put distance between us, and shouted:

"Curse you! If that's how it is…!"

"What do you mean 'if that's how it is'!?"

CLANG.

…Thud…

Along with the sound, a steel helmet came down and struck him directly on the crown of his head, sending Ragastain tumbling over.

Naga and I didn't do it. The one who had suddenly appeared behind the sorcerer and knocked him out with a full-body armored helmet was—

"…Who?"

"Let’s see… that’s Mr. Creville.

The village elder.

Earlier, he was attacked and knocked out in his house by one of Ragastain’s mysterious subordinates."

I answered Naga’s question.

While implicitly suggesting that *she* was the one who had actually knocked him out.

"Hmph! Well, that was a misfortune for him!"

Naga said, puffing out her chest pointlessly.

…Implicit suggestions really don't get through to her…

"But don't you worry!

I, Naga the White Serpent, have defeated Ragastain for you! Ho-ho-ho…"

"I'm the one who just took him down. Just now.

…Though I don't know what happened in the meantime."

Naga’s budding high-pitched laugh froze at the old man's words.

…Wait… is this development what I think it is…?

Mr. Creville looked down at Ragastain.

"…Good grief! How dare you trick us and swindle us out of festival preparation funds and 'advisor fees'!

I'm taking all that money back!"

"Wait! If you do that, our treasure—!"

I hurriedly covered Naga’s mouth with one hand before she could blurt out our plan to seize the loot.

"Wait a minute!

It’s too early to let your guard down!

Ragastain’s subordinates should still be around here somewhere!"

"——W-what!?"

At my words, Mr. Creville became genuinely flustered.

"Here they come!

Get down!"

"O-oh!"

The moment he reflexively ducked.

THWACK!

Struck on the back of the head, Mr. Creville collapsed face-down on the spot.

Of course, it wasn't a blow delivered by Ragastain’s subordinates.

I doubted such people even existed.

The one who did it was, of course, the sole of my boot.

"Hmph. Now the immediate nuisances are gone!

Naga! While we have the chance, let’s get into the mansion and ransack the treasure!"

"…W-wait, Lina… that was a bit much…"

"What are you saying, Naga!

Think about it.

We weren't commissioned by anyone this time.

Which means, even though Ragastain is down, we won't get a single copper coin!

Mr. Creville said he’d 'take the money back,' but even if Ragastain’s treasure is worth more than the money being returned, there’s no way any of that is coming our way!

To put it simply, it’s unpaid labor! Unpaid!"

"…Ugh…!? Unpaid…!?"

The heavy ring of "unpaid labor" finally made even Naga waver.

"That’s right!

We fought a pure-blooded demon and get nothing!

Do you think such an irrational thing should be allowed!?

Don't you think it’s a natural right to receive compensation for one’s labor!?

If that’s the case!

While Mr. Creville is unconscious from being hit by the 'Ragastain subordinates' I made up, there’s no harm in us confiscating the treasure—leaving enough to return to the villagers, of course!"

"Hmph! Come to think of it, you’re right!

All right, Lina! I’ll show you to Ragastain’s treasure room, so follow me!"

"Roger!"

Thus, Naga and I, eyes sparkling with hope, ran across the grassland toward Ragastain’s mansion—

The things in the treasure room were mostly just junk and curios that weren't worth much money.

I’m sure Ragastain was also being cheated by an antique dealer.

Tonight, I think I’ll go knock around some bandits somewhere to vent my frustration.

—Lina

(Lunatic Festival: The End)

Have You Seen My John?

The wind blowing through the town streets was mingled with the cheers of children frolicking about.

It was a peaceful town, not particularly large.

With vacant lots everywhere and mountains nearby—there was no shortage of play areas for children.

Five or six young children were running around here and there—

"Oh!"

A boy who looked energetic raised his voice and stopped.

The others followed suit and looked toward where the boy was staring.

It was someone’s backyard. In a secluded, shady spot, there was a large trash can, and a single black dog had its head shoved inside, scrounging for food.

A mischievous light flickered in the boy's eyes.

He looked around his feet, picked up a suitably sized stone—

"What are you doing?"

"Let's not. Poor thing."

The girls who were with him chimed in, but the boy ignored them, drew back his hand gripping the stone, and—!

"——STOP THAAAAAAAT!"

WHAM.

"Gfgh."

In the nick of time. My full-speed dash-jump-kick successfully neutralized that brat—I mean, that active young boy.

…Phew… that was close…

"Wha… wha…"

"Wha-wha… wha…"

Unable to comprehend the sudden event, the other children looked at me—no, at us—and leaked wordless murmurs.

Well, that was only natural.

From a child's eyes—no, even from a normal person's eyes—the three of us must have looked bizarre. I had at least that much self-awareness.

As for me—long hair with a bandana, shoulder guards with gem talismans, and a short sword. I wouldn't say it’s common, but it’s not a particularly rare outfit…

But one of us wore clothes with a pointlessly high amount of skin showing. Plus, spiked shoulder guards and a skull necklace!

And finally, a figure wrapped entirely in a cloak, with even the face wound around with cloth—as if declaring with every fiber of their being, "I am suspicious!"

There was no way a trio like this wouldn't look suspicious! If I were a general citizen, I’d report us immediately!

However, now was not the time to worry about our appearance.

"…Oww… what do you think you're doing!?"

It seemed I had held back too much; the boy immediately sat up to complain. I grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close.

"Shut it. You… do you realize what you were about to do?"

"Wha… what do you mean… I was just going to throw a stone at that dog…"

"What if the town gets destroyed because you did that!?"

"WHAT!?"

At my angry voice, the children cried out in surprise all at once.

"W-what do you mean by that…?"

"Heh-heh-heh. In this world, there are things you’re happier not knowing."

Breaking into a cold sweat, I said those words in a hollow voice.

The whole thing had started just a little while ago.

"Listen! That’s why I said—!"

"What are you talking about, Lina! In the first place—"

——Silence.

Apparently, we both noticed it at the same time.

A highway where there wasn't much foot traffic. I—the warrior and genius sorceress Lina Inverse—and the traveling parasite Naga the White Serpent were walking along, bickering as usual—

Ahead of us, by the side of the weed-grown road, a single shadow crouched with its back to us.

We fell silent and stopped because we noticed it.

The clothes it wore were very ordinary women's attire. A beige blouse and a skirt of the same color. The kind you could find in any town.

However…

The problem wasn't the clothes, but the person wearing them.

What was the deal with the black feathers on the back, the six arms, and the horn growing from the right side of the forehead?

Moreover, it was groaning about something.

Naga and I stood still for just a second—

"Um. It's very nice weather today, isn't it, Ms. Naga?"

"Hmph. Yes it is, Ms. Lina. I hear the sun-dried bricks are hardening well this year."

Continuing a conversation as natural as possible, we started walking again, trying not to look in that direction.

We walked past behind the groaning shadow, moving our arms and legs in sync, casually—

——We made it past——

Just as I thought that and let out a small sigh of relief in my heart.

A voice was heard.

A muffled, small voice from the shadow.

"…Ugh… my chronic spasms are acting up…"

"LIKE HELL THEY ARE!"

Naga and I reflexively shouted the retort!

……

D-dammit! Out of habit!

"Ah. Excuse me. You kind people over there."

Saying that, the figure turned around, revealing a face with no right eye—only an unnaturally large left eye staring at us.

"Actually… I'm in a bit of a bind…"

"……And?"

I had no choice.

I spoke.

"What are you doing? Raugea Thorn."

"EH!?"

He (I assume) sounded surprised.

——Raugea Thorn——He was someone Naga and I had encountered during an incident some time ago.

Despite looking like this… or rather, exactly as he looked, he was actually a respectable pure-blooded demon.

Everyone knows what a demon is.

You often hear about Lesser Demons or Brass Demons. They’re opponents that novice warriors or sorcerers can't stand against…

A pure-blooded demon, to put it simply, is a group that is a whole level—or rather, a whole digit—stronger than those Lesser or Brass Demons.

Based in the northern Kataart Mountains, they are the ones who spread death, terror, and destruction to all living things—

…Or they should be…

"H-how did you know!? That it was me!"

From his dim-witted attitude, I couldn't feel even a shred of terror.

Well… certainly, his appearance was quite scary…

But this guy was an oddball who, thanks to Naga, had been reunited with a dragon he used to keep, and had left after chatting pleasantly about old memories.

And now he was wearing women's clothes by the roadside saying, "My chronic spasms are acting up." In a sense, it was incredibly scary, and if possible, I didn't want anything to do with him…

"How… well… I don't want to explain because it’s a pain, so I won't…

So, what are you doing? In a place like this?"

I didn't really want to hear it, but since I’d already engaged, I’d lost. I asked in a half-hearted voice.

"Actually, well… a bit of a problem has arisen…

But I am a demon, however lowly. If it were known that I borrowed the strength of mere humans, it would be a disgrace to my name. So even if my mouth were to be torn asunder, I cannot say things like 'lend me a hand' or 'help me.'

Therefore.

Since humans are basically good-natured and foolish creatures, I calculated that if

I pretended to be a woman in distress, they would surely lend a hand on their own accord. So I got ahead of the two of you and tried to catch your eyes with my realistic acting…

I just don't understand why, even though I'm explaining this now, you two are walking away in silence."

Raugea Thorn spoke inquisitively as he followed us while we walked away.

"If you won't listen no matter what… I'll have to keep getting ahead of you and continue suffering from my chronic spasms until you do…"

…Ugh! That might actually be worse… a pure-blooded demon suffering from spasms everywhere we go.

Again, I had no choice but to stop and turn around.

"Listen.

No matter what the circumstances, when you want someone to do something for you, you need things like sincerity, money, or a scheme.

You had none of those. Just now. None."

"WHAT!? Are you saying there was a flaw in my meticulous psychological strategy!?"

"No… not a flaw…

You said you were trying to pretend to be a woman in distress… but did you look at yourself?"

"Myself?"

Raugea Thorn muttered and drew a circle in the air with his fingertip. What appeared there was something that looked like a mirror.

To do such a thing without even chanting a spell… what a terrifying waste of ability.

He stared at himself intently for a while—

"——I see! It's the wig!"

"No, that's not the issue."

"Whatever it is, what on earth happened in the end?"

Naga asked, sounding like she was getting fed up with everything.

"Actually, well… John, whom I was keeping, has gone missing…"

"Oh."

"Maybe you didn't feed him enough?"

Naga and I said with zero interest.

By the way, that name "John" sounds like a dog's name, but it refers to the Demon King Dragon that Raugea Thorn had been keeping, or rather, was attached to him.

The Demon King Dragon—

Also a dark dragon living in the Kataart Mountains, its combat power is the strongest among the dragon race. The dark breath it exhales from its mouth is said to return all life to nothingness.

On the other hand, for a dragon, its intelligence isn't particularly high, and a high-level practitioner can summon and employ it.

In fact, Naga can use that spell—it was because of that that Raugea Thorn and John, the dragon he used to keep, were reunited before.

Raugea Thorn and John had rejoiced at their reunion and were supposed to have returned to the Kataart Mountains after leaving us a thank-you…

But that John had disappeared once again.

"Hmm. Well, do your best searching."

Naga dismissed him, but Raugea Thorn flapped his wings like a child throwing a tantrum.

"No. I've tried searching in my own way…

But whenever I enter a town in disguise, the humans make such a fuss that it becomes impossible to look for John.

Because of that, I can't even get any proper information…"

"Huh!?"

Naga and I frowned.

"Why are you going to a human town to look for John, who went missing in Kataart?"

At Naga's question, Raugea Thorn clapped two of his six hands together.

"——Ah. Right. I haven't explained that yet.

Actually, after I parted with the two of you—

I went back to Kataart once, but as I said before, demons are basically forbidden from having pets.

The high-ranking demon who spoke for me before is currently away on business. The place where I used to keep him was destroyed in the battle where I was separated from John…

Every day, those around me would give me nagging lectures like spiteful sisters-in-law, saying that pets are no good…"

…So demons have sisters-in-law too.

"So, I had no choice but to leave Kataart and live quietly with John in the mountains near here…

One day, I went out for a bit, and when I came back, John was gone…"

"——Wait… wait a minute!"

"Something wrong?"

Raugea Thorn asked back calmly as I hurriedly interrupted him.

"…Then… does that mean, by any chance…

There’s a stray Demon King Dragon wandering around this area!?"

"I don't know if he's 'stray' or not…

There’s a possibility that a human passing by saw how cute John was, mistook him for a cat or something, and took him home."

"Impossible."

Naga and I denied it instantly.

"No, you say that, but actually, I knew John would stand out if he were just in the mountains, and he might be attacked by high-strung humans or other dragons…

So I manipulated the space around John so that he would look and feel like a small animal."

"You can do that!?"

I couldn't help but cry out.

Hmm… the abilities of a pure-blooded demon are truly fearsome.

"In that case, what does he look like now?"

Asked Naga.

"Let’s see… he's black, about the size of a creature called a dog, and as for his appearance…"

Asked, Raugea Thorn traced the ground nearby with his finger. What was soon drawn there was…

……What is this?

To put it into perspective, it looked like something drawn by a very young child who was half-asleep and using their left hand without looking at anything.

At the very least, you could tell it had four legs—

"……"

Naga and I looked at each other in silence.

Apparently, expecting artistic talent from a demon was a mistake in the first place.

Naturally, it was impossible to find anything based on this drawing.

I mean… it really felt like, "So, what are we supposed to do?"…

"Of course, if John were in his original form and size, finding him would be easy…

But I can't use the method of canceling the spatial manipulation from a distance to make John stand out and find him. To cancel it, I have to touch John directly…"

Ignoring our predicament, Raugea Thorn continued his explanation.

"So, I wanted to ask if Naga could somehow summon him again using the spell she used to call John out that time…"

"Even if you say that…"

Addressed, Naga also had a troubled face.

"That spell is for vaguely summoning a Demon King Dragon… so I can't call out a specific one."

"Then, if you summon Demon King Dragons one after another in this area, eventually John might appear among them…"

"The most I can call with that spell is one. Calling one, leaving it as it is, and then calling another is impossible.

Besides, it’s quite doubtful if I can summon John while he’s under some strange spatial manipulation."

Naga answered Raugea Thorn’s scary suggestion with flat composure.

"Is that so…"

Raugea Thorn’s shoulders slumped.

As expected of a materialized spiritual lifeform, his disappointment was so great that even the horn on his head wilted, which was a little cute.

Anyway, this seemed to be a dead end.

It didn't seem like Naga and I helping would change much, and a pure-blooded demon like him wouldn't be paying us a fee.

Well, I’d just have to explain it properly, have him give up, and ask him to leave.

"…Hmm… well then…"

I scratched my head.

"He’s dog-sized and might be wandering around in the mountains…

To be honest, I don't think he’ll be found just by Naga and me helping out a bit.

In fact, since he doesn't have any particularly distinctive features, even if Naga or I saw him, we wouldn't know it was John."

"Features… features… I see…"

Raugea Thorn put one of his hands on his chin (or what seemed to be his chin).

"True… his size is about that of a dog, he looks like this, his color is black… and at most… when he gets angry, he breathes out a dark breath…"

"HE BREATHES IT!?"

Naga and I harmonized again.

"A-and! Even while the space around him is being tinkered with? For example, if someone throws a stone at him…

…He breathes? That darkness… the Dark Hollow Howl?"

"Of course he would."

"EEEEK!"

He answered as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and Naga and I screamed, clutching our heads.

In other words.

There was an animal that looked like nothing but a dog wandering around this area, and if a child were to hit it with a stick or throw a stone at it for fun, it would exhale a breath that could wipe out an entire small village.

Th-that’s not funny at all…

"…N-Naga… is it just my imagination, or should we really do something about this?"

"…Hmph… what a coincidence, Lina Inverse… I was just about to be gripped by the same thought."

"Then—!"

At Raugea Thorn’s brightened voice, I nodded stiffly.

"We’ll help as much as we can.

But honestly, there are too few clues."

"That’s true. From what I’ve gathered so far by asking around, all I’ve found is that hunters from a town called Phronez, which is ahead of this highway, sometimes go to the mountain where I was keeping John…

Well, I don't think that John could be caught by mere human hunters, but I don't have any other clues…"

…Hmm… that clue was indeed too weak. As he said, it was hard to imagine a normal hunter being able to do anything about something that exhales the Dark Hollow Howl.

But—there was always a chance.

For instance, they might have caught John while he was sleeping.

And if that "one in a million" chance were a reality—

John’s breath would explode right in the middle of town.

On the other hand, if John were still wandering the mountains, even if he breathed there, there probably wouldn't be any human casualties.

If so, even if the possibility was slim, it would be better to check that town first.

"Okay, first is that town.

…But since we don't know what John looks like, we have no choice but to have Raugea Thorn come with us…

But that appearance is…

uhm… Raugea Thorn, take off those clothes.

Naga, lend him your cloak too."

I took off my cloak and had Raugea Thorn "disguise" himself.

And so.

Naga, I, and Raugea Thorn—wrapped in our two cloaks—the three of us (?) began our search of the nearby town, Phronez.

And as soon as we entered the town.

What we witnessed was a child about to throw a stone at something that looked like a black dog.

In the nick of time, we managed to stop the child—

"How about it? Is that him?"

I turned my gaze toward Raugea Thorn and asked.

I was asking if that thing the child was about to throw a stone at was John—

"No, it’s not. It’s not John."

Covered completely by Naga’s cloak and with his face hidden by mine, he shook his head with a muffled voice.

The dog in question looked up, stared at us for a while, and then went back to scrounging in the trash can.

…Tch. How confusing.

"…Wh-what’s with the dog?"

To the boy who was murmuring in my grip, I turned my eyes and said:

"Oh right. I want to ask, do you know any hunters in this town who used to go to the mountains to the east?

Or have you heard any stories about a hunter who caught something?"

"I-I don't know anything about…"

"Ah! Maybe…"

Interrupting the boy's voice, one of his girl friends murmured.

When I turned my eyes to her, she turned her gaze away for some reason and said in a small, trembling voice:

"…U-um… this is just a 'maybe'…

But I heard that Donald the hunter… caught a rare creature about the size of a dog in the mountains…"

"——That’s it!"

Raugea Thorn raised his voice.

"And where is that hunter now!? Where’s his house!?"

The girl answered my eager question half-crying.

"H-his house… I think it’s in the north of the town…"

"Ah! I know!"

The boy I was holding raised his voice.

He glared at me with a defiant look.

"You guys want that strange creature, don't you!

You’re going to make money by showing it off!

But too bad! You’re too late!

Uncle Donald said it’s a rare creature, so he’s going to present it to the Lord, and

he’s already left!"

"WHAAAAAAT!?"

The three of us harmonized our voices.

L-Lord…

Come to think of it, if we followed this highway for a while, there should be a fairly large castle town.

Of course, it had a decent population.

And if John were to exhale his breath in a place like that… it would undoubtedly be a catastrophe.

"When you say 'already left,' when exactly!?"

"I-I don't know. But he should be gone by now."

——This was bad. This was very bad.

"We’re going after him immediately!"

At my voice, the two nodded—

And the three of us started running.

While being showered with insults from the children—

The encounter was met with hostility and voices demanding our identity.

"Who are you!?"

Along with the voices, the mercenaries' hands went to their respective weapons.

Well, it was a natural reaction.

Though it was called a highway, it was a road cutting through a dense mountain with no foot traffic.

Plants and trees grew thick on both sides, a place that would surely be in the top 100 recommended attack points for bandits.

Suddenly, three unknown figures had come flying from behind using high-speed flight spells and stood in their path. It would be impossible *not* to be on guard.

After leaving Phronez.

The three of us—Naga, I, and Raugea Thorn—had been flying down the highway at full speed. Well… the method Raugea Thorn the pure-blooded demon was using might not have been a simple high-speed flight spell, but an unknown method of movement, but regardless—

How long had we been going like that? Eventually, we discovered a group traveling

along the road.

A ramshackle horse-drawn carriage pulled by a dejected horse. Something large and square was on top of it, completely covered with a cloth.

Walking with the carriage were a man dressed somewhat neatly and three others who looked like mercenary guards.

Their appearance practically screamed that they were transporting a valuable animal they didn't want people to see.

Given the place and our appearance.

It would be a problem if we called out from behind, they got suspicious, and the carriage made a dash for it. So we stood in their path, prepared to be somewhat suspicious.

"You're Donald, the hunter from Phronez, aren't you?"

It was Raugea Thorn who spoke first.

"Wh-what do you want!?"

The neatly dressed man asked back, putting up a front while losing color in his face.

Oh! It seemed he was the one.

Raugea Thorn let his eyes gleam from under the cloak covering his face.

"Heh heh heh… don't worry, humans… we are by no means suspicious."

"LIAR!"

Everyone else reflexively retorted. Including Naga and me.

Naga sighed and brushed back her hair.

"Listen, Raugea Thorn, do you have any self-awareness of how suspicious you look right now?"

"Don't you talk."

I had to retort this time.

Then, I scratched my head and turned toward Donald and the others.

"…Er… actually, that animal you've got on that horse carriage…

It's a bit of a troublesome one."

"…Troublesome?"

At my words, Donald frowned.

"Yeah. It seems like it’s been okay so far… but if you handle it a bit wrong, some really big things could happen…

I heard you’re planning to present it to the Lord…

But if some strange trouble happens after you hand it over, you can only imagine what kind of punishment you’d receive from the Lord."

"What? What is this 'big things' or 'strange trouble' you’re talking about?"

"Well… it’s hard to explain in a word…"

I mean, he probably wouldn't believe me even if I did.

"Anyway, Raugea Thorn here was the original owner of that thing.

They got separated due to a bit of trouble…"

"——Ha! I see!"

Donald snorted at my words.

"I’ve read you! You’re trying to say all that to trick me, take that thing, and make a profit for yourself!

That’s not going to happen! If I take that to the Lord, I should get a decent reward!

I’ve even hired guards expecting that!

…Well… if you absolutely insist, I might listen to your offer… But in that case, you’ll have to give me a suitable 'thank-you'."

——A thank-you——

When he said that, Naga and I briefly exchanged glances.

Of course, Donald was saying this:

If we wanted him to hand it over, we had to pile up the money.

But naturally, Naga and I had no obligation to go that far. We turned our gaze to Raugea Thorn—

"A thank-you?"

He tilted his head slightly.

"Does that mean… you want me to interpret that as 'at least save my life' or 'at least let me die without suffering' or 'at least don't lay a hand on my family'?"

"NO, IT DOESN'T!"

I shouted from the side in a hurry—but it was too late.

"I KNEW IT, THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE PLANNING!"

Donald screamed, his face turning pale.

Oh, man. Come to think of it, there was no way Raugea Thorn, a pure-blooded demon, would understand things like monetary thank-yous.

Negotiations, broken.

"You guys! Get rid of them!"

"Yeah!"

The mercenaries responded to Donald's cry.

Clang! A sharp metallic sound rang out, and the blades of swords and the tips of spears glistened in the sunlight.

Not wanting to be caught in the fight, Donald scurried away and hid behind the horse carriage.

"Hmph! I don't know who you are, but—"

The warrior in full-body armor with a greatsword at the front spoke.

"Meeting us, the three Grans brothers, is the end of your luck!"

The man on the right, in leather armor with dual scimitars, followed.

"Become rust on our blades!"

The man on the left, in a breastplate with a spear, finished.

The three brothers spoke up resonantly:

"My sword shatters even rock!"

"My blade carves even the wind!"

"My spear pierces the very heavens!"

Clang! They crossed their weapons in unison, their voices harmonizing perfectly:

"**...Is what we hope to achieve someday!**"

"That's just a wish!?" I yelled.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Well now... aren't you a riot! You 'Whatever-Brothers' or whoever you are! Do you really think you can do anything to me, the White Serpent Naga, with that attitude!? If you were willing to listen quietly, that would be one thing—but if you're going to point weapons at me, that's another story!"

Naga let out a laugh of supreme confidence from the bottom of her heart, throwing out provocations she didn't need to make. But she didn't understand. She didn't understand the *true* threat.

"Naga! Watch out!"

I called out from the side, but she just gave a derisive snort.

"Hmph! You've certainly lost your nerve, Lina! Are you seriously flinching at opponents of this level?" she said, sounding completely patronizing.

"Listen, Naga," I said, staring intently at the wagon. "Don't you ever forget. If you provoke it with some weird attack spell... **the Void-Howl is coming.**"

Snap.

Beside me, I felt Naga freeze up.

That's right—the opponent we really had to be wary of wasn't some weird set of triplets. It was John, who was presumably inside that wagon. For example, it would be easy to blow those guys away with a single offensive spell. In a normal situation, I probably would have done exactly that before the mercenary brothers even finished introducing themselves.

However—John was likely right next to them. If we carelessly provoked him and he let out a Void-Howl, there was a high probability Naga and I would be caught in it too. If that happened, regardless of what might happen to the Mazoku Raugea Thorn, Naga and I wouldn't stand a chance. If we knew which way John was facing, we might be able to dodge, but since the box or cage holding him was completely covered by a cloth, that was impossible.

And furthermore—since those mercenary brothers looked like total amateurs who didn't understand the situation, there was a danger the same thing could happen if they just tripped toward John or let their weapons slip.

I *could* just blow them all up along with John, but that would immediately make us enemies with Raugea Thorn. I have no intention of sucking up to a pure Mazoku, but if a fight is unnecessary, it's better to avoid it.

Which meant...

To make sure nothing like that happened, we had to beat down those mercenary brothers as gently and quietly as possible.

...This... well, I wouldn't say it was impossible, but the pressure was definitely on.

As Naga and I stood frozen, dripping with cold sweat, Raugea Thorn took a step forward.

"I see..."

"**DON'T YOU MOVE A MUSCLE!!**"

Naga and I screamed in unison, clinging to him with teary eyes. If someone like him, who clearly didn't know the meaning of "holding back," made a move, I didn't even want to imagine the consequences.

"J-Just... just stay back, Raugea Thorn. Leave this to us. We have... we have a plan. Right? Right!?"

"Ho-ho-ho! Exactly! It's much wiser to leave this to us and just stay still and watch!"

"I don't mind, but... why have both of you been radiating intense waves of terror for the last few minutes?"

"Anyway!"

"Just stay there!"

"I... I understand."

Having managed to push Raugea Thorn to the side of the road, Naga and I faced off against the three mercenary brothers once more.

"Hah! Behold, my brothers! See how they falter before our majestic presence even before the fight begins!" the greatsword user boasted.

"This match is as good as won!" the dual-wielder howled.

"However, we are not without mercy! If you retreat now, we shall let you go!" The spearman wore a fearless smirk.

But they didn't move from their spot.

I see. They were prioritizing guarding the cargo over driving us off. Not a bad judgment.

On our end, we wanted to pull them away from John so we could fight comfortably. I decided to try a provocation.

"Saying all that... you haven't budged an inch. Truth is, you're actually scared to fight, aren't you?"

"Absurd! I do not move simply because I am exhausted by the weight of this armor!"

"I do not move because my legs have been shaking for a while now!"

"I do not move because moving alone makes me feel lonely!"

These guys are hopeless.

Donald... really hired a bunch of duds.

Sigh...

I let out a long breath.

"...Fine. Then I'm coming to you."

I started walking straight toward the three of them. I put my hand on the short sword hanging at my waist—

"Here she comes! Little girl!"

Chanting together, the three brothers put strength into their weapons.

I shot a quick glance at the dual-wielder on the right, unclipped my short sword—scabbard and all—with my right hand, and drew it with a *shink* with my left. Then, just before entering their range, I tossed the unsheathed blade onto the ground.

"——!?"

Unable to comprehend what I had just done, a flash of agitation crossed the brothers' faces.

In that instant, I kicked off the ground!

First, the spearman on the left! I sprinted past the greatsword user, closing the distance! The greatsword user, hampered by the weight of his gear, his confusion, and my initial gaze, couldn't react.

The spearman, panicked, pulled back his spear to thrust it at me—

Clang.

Using the scabbard remaining in my right hand, I parried the tip of the spear to the left and simultaneously stepped between the spearman and the wagon, getting inside his guard.

I spun the scabbard in my hand and drove the tip into his temple—

Thud.

With a dull impact, the spearman's body slumped.

One down.

By then, the other two were frantically trying to circle around me.

I threw away the scabbard, snatched the spear from the falling man's hands, and backed away.

Seeing the light-footed dual-wielder coming at me first, I shouted at the top of my lungs:

"This is how you use a spear! Behold! My secret technique: **Aerial Spear Piercing Strike!**"

As I said it, I hurled the spear high into the air!

"What!?"

The dual-wielder instinctively looked up. His chin was left wide open—

Crack!

My foot kicked straight up.

"Gah!?"

The greatsword user right behind him scrambled to catch the falling dual-wielder, but the man had already lost consciousness from the concussion.

And then—

Not missing the chance while the greatsword user's vision was blocked by his comrade's body, I sprinted and circled behind him.

I had no weapon now. And the opponent was in high-defense full plate armor. But—that's exactly why some techniques are effective!

I delivered a sharp kick to the back of the greatsword user's knees and jumped back!

"Whoa!?"

With a cry of shock and a heavy thud, the greatsword user's body slammed into the earth!

Witness it! The deadly **Inverse Knee-Buckler!**

Between the weight of his equipment and the fact that he was supporting a falling ally, a sudden knee-buckle is impossible to resist, even for someone with decent strength.

"Ngh...!"

The greatsword user raised his head, trying to push himself up, but—

Squish.

The sole of my boot stepped firmly onto his face.

Having his face stepped on—or rather, his head pressed into the ground—caused the greatsword user to pass out instantly.

Note: If you mess up the force of the stomp, you can actually kill the person, so all you good kids out there shouldn't try this. ...Actually, let's just ignore the fundamental point that "good kids" wouldn't try to stomp on someone in the first place.

The spear I had tossed up earlier landed with a clatter on the ground.

That signaled the end of the battle.

Hmph. Too easy.

I don't mean to brag, but I'm actually quite decent with swords and martial arts. Well, in this case, a large part of it was thanks to the brothers being... what they were.

"Oh. Impressive, Lina-san," Raugea Thorn said.

"Hmph. Well, I suppose they weren't even worth my time," Naga added.

She’s starting to get on my nerves.

Anyway. Now then...

I turned toward the wagon and called out to Donald, who was hiding behind it.

"Your 'Three Brothers' are all down! I'm not trying to threaten you, but at least listen to what we have to say! Mr. Donald!"

"What are you talking about?"

The confused voice came from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder to see Raugea Thorn looking puzzled.

"That man went into the mountains with John just a moment ago."

"..."

Naga and I let out a blank sound. Raugea Thorn continued:

"See, while that man was hiding in the wagon, he was trying to sneak John out the back... I tried to step forward, but you two stopped me, didn't you? During that time, he took John and went toward the mountains... right through those bushes, very quickly. You told me to stay still and watch, so I just watched quietly... That was... the plan, right?"

".....O-Of course it was!"

I puffed out my chest and declared it with total confidence.

...If I admitted I hadn't noticed and lost his trust here, there was a risk Raugea Thorn would start acting on his own without considering the trouble he'd cause.

So, with a calm expression and a lowered voice, I said:

"Me calling out just now was a strategy to make them think we hadn't noticed Donald was gone, catching them off guard!"

"I see! I never would have thought of that!"

"Exactly! Now, let's go after him immediately!"

"Hmph! Understood!"

"This time for sure!"

And so, the three of us plunged into the mountains in pursuit of Donald!

The mountain air near dusk was dominated only by the stifling scent of greenery.

We sprinted through the dense overgrowth, searching for any sign of Donald. Since he was carrying John, he shouldn't be able to move very fast. Still, once a distance has been opened in a place with bad visibility and obstacles, finding someone isn't easy.

—Normally, that is.

"This way," Raugea said shortly after we started running, subtly correcting our course.

"You know? You know where John is?"

"It's a spatial manipulation I cast myself. At this distance, I can tell his general location."

Alright, lucky! Now the only problem was how to get John back from Donald without agitating him—

But before any good ideas could surface, we broke through a small thicket into a slightly open area. Further ahead, I saw the back of a running man.

Found him—good, but—

Whether he heard our footsteps or sensed us, Donald glanced back over his shoulder. His face contorted with terror.

"D-Don't come any closer!!"

Of course, we couldn't just stop because he said so.

As expected, carrying John was a burden; even for a man used to the mountains, his pace wasn't fast. We would catch up soon.

However, he seemed to realize that too.

"I said don't come any closer!!"

Bellowing desperately, he stopped and spun around.

"Ngh...!?"

We instinctively groaned and came to a halt.

In Donald's right hand was a rather large, glinting knife. He was pressing the tip against the object he held in his left arm.

There was a creature there—

...How do I put this...

It was black, about the size of a dog... yeah. If I had to describe it, it looked like some kind of animal drawn by a sleepy child using their left hand without looking.

It had four things that looked like legs, which were wiggling around.

And it looked—frighteningly similar to the scribble Lagiasorne had made on the ground earlier.

"...John?"

"That's John!"

"Hey, Raugea Thorn..." Naga said, looking somewhat disgruntled. "Where exactly does that look like a dog?"

"I didn't say it was a dog. I said it was about the *size* of a dog."

As Raugea Thorn spoke...

Ah. The problem wasn't his drawing skills; it was his sense of design.

I was oddly satisfied by this realization.

Setting aside my minor internal conflict:

"Listen! Come any closer and I'll kill this thing!"

Driven into a corner and confused, Donald pointed the tip of the knife toward the John he was holding.

"Listen! Like I told you before, that's a dangerous creature and—"

"Shut up!"

Refusing to even listen to my attempt at persuasion, he glared with bloodshot eyes.

"You're just saying whatever you can to steal this thing for yourselves, present it to the Lord or the King, and rake in a massive reward, aren't you!? I won't let you! If I'm going to let you have all the glory, I'd rather kill it right here and ruin everything!"

He was clearly in a state of high panic, shouting nonsense.

If he just thought about it for a second, he'd realize that doing such a thing wouldn't solve anything—but he was in a mental state where he couldn't even "think for a second."

Worse, people in this state often actually go through with the crazy things they threaten, making it a nightmare to deal with.

This is... bad.

If he hurts John, John will get angry and breathe fire—and Raugea Thorn will get

angry and go on a rampage too.

Not to mention Donald, Naga and I would be caught in the crossfire, and it might not stop there; it could turn into a disaster for nearby towns.

I have to avoid that at all costs.

However, even if I explained the situation properly, I didn't think he'd believe me... and if I had Raugea Thorn show his true form to make him believe, he'd probably just panic even more.

Either way, I had to get him to let go of John first.

...Fine... in that case, it's time for the **"Silver Tongue, Thousand Lies"** attack!

"...Alright... I get it..." I said with a sigh, giving a small shrug. "I'll tell you the truth. That... is actually a creature created through sorcery by a court mage of a certain kingdom."

"...What...?"

At my fishy-sounding fabricated story, Donald's expression shifted slightly.

—Yes! He’s hooked!

"Didn't you think it was strange? Think about it. Do you really think a creature that bizarre just exists normally? If it did, why hasn't anyone ever found one until now? You talk to your fellow hunters, don't you? Have you ever heard even a rumor of a creature like that? Why did a creature that no one has ever heard of just suddenly turn up? The answer is simple. A creature like that didn't exist in this world to begin with. Someone made it, and for some reason, it was in the mountains. Doesn't that seem more natural? I'll save the explanation of which country made it or what kind of power it has for later—but there's one thing I can say for sure. If you take that thing to the Lord, you, without a doubt, will be 'erased.'"

Donald swallowed hard.

"If that happens, our mission will be a failure and we'll be punished. But you'll just be erased and that's the end. Everyone here ends up miserable. Do you actually like that kind of development? Now—about the country that made it and its abilities—if I explain any more, you won't be able to turn back. I'll ask you just once. Do you want to hear more?"

I fell silent.

".....! ...!? .....!"

Donald's eyes darted around nervously. He opened and closed his mouth as if he wanted to say something—

"Lina, what's with all these lies you've been telling?"

"Weren't you listening to me? I told you, that's my pet, John."

"**IT WAS A LIEEEE!?**"

Donald screamed with teary eyes as Naga and Lagiasorne blurted out the truth.

"**WAIT A MINUTE!!**"

I turned and snapped at the two of them, also with teary eyes.

"I was trying so hard to tell a plausible lie to get him to let go of John! Don't just ruin it so casually!!"

"What!? That was a strategy!?"

"You should have just told us sooner."

"Figure it out! I shouldn't have to tell you!"

"So it *was* a lie!"

Donald, who had been on the verge of believing me, suddenly became aggressive again and tightened his grip on John.

Aaaaahhh. It’s no use.

At this point, he wouldn't believe anything I said.

"In that case, the part about it being a dangerous creature is obviously a lie too! You guys just want to get your hands on it while it's still alive... but as for me, I don't care if the reward is for the corpse of a weird creature!"

He brandished the knife in his right hand.

Of course, there was no way a knife could kill John, who was essentially a Demon Lord Dragon, but there was a chance he'd get angry and breathe fire.

In fact, it was a near miracle he hadn't breathed fire yet.

...Since things have gotten this complicated, maybe the best move is to retreat for now and try again later...

But even if I suggested that, I wasn't sure if Raugea Thorn would agree...

Just as I was thinking that—

"**URAAGHHHHHH!!**"

Bellowing in unison and pushing through the bushes, two of the mercenary brothers—the spearman and the dual-wielder—came charging in!

Oh. They've recovered.

"Oh! You're safe!" Donald shouted with a broad smile.

But the situation was different now. John wasn't right next to them.

I chanted the spell under my breath—

"**Bomb Di Wind!**"

KABOOM!

The "Words of Power" I unleashed detonated at their feet—easily blowing both of them away along with the dirt.

Easy, easy.

But.

"Now! Run!"

The voice came from Donald's direction.

I spun around to see the greatsword user standing there, shielding Donald!

Damn it! I thought he was just late because his armor was heavy, but that was actually a decent diversionary tactic!

Hmph! To go so far as to put his body on the line to fulfill the request... his skills might be shoddy, but he's got some guts!

"I-I understand!"

Donald turned to flee. And then—

"Hmph! Do you think you can escape!? **Ice Arrow!**"

Naga unleashed her spell!

"...Hey, wait!"

"Ah! My hand slipped!"

Naga's face went pale at my voice.

But even if she regretted it, the spell couldn't be stopped.

Naga and the greatsword user. On the extension of that line was Donald.

And—in his arms—was John.

The moment felt like an eternity.

A dozen or so arrows of freezing cold were unleashed.

They crossed the void; several hit the greatsword user directly, freezing parts of his armor—

The rest continued through the air, heading straight for the back of the fleeing Donald—

—And hit.

He fell face-forward with ice clinging to his back—

Pugi.

Was that John's cry?

Eventually, John wiggled out from underneath the crushed man.

His eyes—it was probably just my imagination—seemed to flash with a glint of rage.

John leaned back and took a deep breath—

—It's over.—

Someone whispered in my head.

Various memories flashed through my mind in an instant.

The delicious Ratel potatoes I'd eaten, the wonderfully tasty Milsar fish, the fragrant Nigitake mushrooms, and of course, the Pelmo pudding I couldn't forget.

As if to blow all those memories away—

John let out a great breath—

Képu.

From his stupidly open mouth, a black, hazy mist wafted out, drifted for a second, and vanished.

.....

That was it.

There was no sign of anything else happening.

Raugea Thorn said in a grave voice, "Ngh... so I couldn't stop it after all! John's ultimate **Void-Howl!**"

"Uh, excuse me."

I waved my hand at Raugea Thorn, my voice sounding somewhat hollow. "That... just now... was the Void-Howl?"

"You saw it, didn't you! Just now!"

"I certainly saw it, but..." Naga said, looking disgruntled. "That puff of smoke that looked like burnt fish... that was the Void-Howl?"

"Yes. Since I'm manipulating the space around John, it manifests like that... but it is unmistakably the Void-Howl."

...Uh...

Recognizing Raugea Thorn, John started waddling toward us. Naga caught him halfway.

"There." She gave him a little tap with her fist.

Képu.

Haze.

...Oh. This is kind of fun. Me too, me too.

"Take that."

Képu.

Haze.

.....It’s completely harmless.....

"...Hey, Lina..." Naga muttered, looking down at John. I couldn't see her expression. "I want to ask... is it possible that all our worrying, effort, and stress up until now... was all for noth—"

"Don't say it."

"...Ngh... ugh... GAH!?"

Hearing a groan, Naga and I glanced over to see Donald, still with ice on his back, pushing himself halfway up and glaring at us.

His brow furrowed in confusion.

"What's with you people...? That look on your faces...? Your goal was this creature that spits out black burps, wasn't it?"

Black burps.

Well, yeah, it certainly felt like that.

"Exactly," Raugea Thorn said, standing tall.

"...Ngh... I won't... let you..."

"We won't... let you..."

The three mercenary brothers groaned. Whether half-frozen or blown away, they were still determined to carry out their mission.

Hmph... personally, I don't hate that kind of attitude...

But there's no need to let things get any more complicated.

I scooped up John. I don't know how he manipulated the space, but he had a fur-like texture and weighed about as much as a real dog.

"Here, Raugea Thorn."

I handed him over—

"We need to convince these people, so—can you just cancel John's spatial manipulation for a second?"

"I understand."

After his reply, I turned back to Donald and the mercenary brothers.

"I'll show you. That child's true form."

Now then. I wondered how they would react when they saw it.

They all went into a full kowtow.

As the highway cutting through the mountains began to glow with the colors of dusk, we, Raugea Thorn, and John reached the time for our farewells.

"Everyone, thank you so much for your help today."

Having reapplied the spatial manipulation to turn John back into "weird creature mode,"Raugea Thorn spoke to us while holding him in both hands.

He had also returned our cloaks and was now showing his true form.

By the way, Donald and the three brothers, having learned the true identities of Raugea Thorn and John, were still kowtowing on the ground behind Naga and me.

Naturally, once they knew the truth, they stopped demanding John or rewards. Obviously.

"Hmph. See that you're more careful from now on," Naga said bossily.

You didn't really do anything, did you?

"Still... if John's breath was going to be harmless, you could have just said so from the start. We could have settled this much faster."

As I spoke with a wry smile,Raugea Thorn looked at me blankly.

"Eh? It's not harmless. As a result of manipulating space, it only looks like a little black mist where John is, but the full destructive power of the Void-Howl should definitely be exploding somewhere else."

"..."

The smiles on Naga's and my faces froze.

"...Um... where... exactly...?"

At my tentative question, Raugea Thorn tilted his head.

"Who knows... could be in the mountains, at the bottom of the sea... or perhaps in the middle of a city... Well, as a Mazoku, it would be a hilarious punchline if you went back to town and found nothing but a crater. Hahaha."

...Mazoku humor... is not funny...

Wait... Naga and I both poked him once just for fun and made him breathe fire...

—No. Come to think of it, the fact that Donald described John as "a creature that spits black burps" means he's already done it many times...

.....

I glanced back over my shoulder; Donald, still kowtowing, was drenched in cold sweat and shaking uncontrollably.

...U-Uh...

"Well then, we shall take our leave."

Without noticing our agitation, Raugea Thorn vanished along with John.

He likely crossed through space to go somewhere else.

And so—

After the incident ended, what remained on the mountain highway was us, standing there dazed in the sunset, and the sound of a crow calling from somewhere—

For a while after that, I felt like I might have heard rumors in the towns we traveled to about various mysterious, unexplained incidents...

But of course—

Both Naga and I decided we hadn't heard a thing.

And they lived happily... happily... happ...

I'm lying, I'm sorry, it's not a happy ending, I won't do it again.

(Have You Seen My John?: The End)

Afterword

Author: Pwahahaha! It's out! It's finally out! Slayers Special Volume 19, *Lunatic Festival*!

Hero: Agh...! We couldn't stop it...!

Female Mage: At... At this rate, the world will...!

Author: .....Who are you guys?

L: Let's just ignore those weirdos. Anyway, man, it's been a long time. It's been fifteen years since Professor Yoshimura excavated the hieroglyphs stating that Volume 18 was released.

Author: It hasn't been *that* long! Well, it has been a long time, granted. So, first off, this year's New Year's card is...

L: Wait a second. It's summer. Right now. With all my might.

Author: Well, academically speaking, that interpretation is correct. But who cares? It doesn't matter if it's a little out of season. After all, I got a new air conditioner this year, so it's cool and comfortable even though it's summer.

L: It doesn't change the fact that it's insanely out of season... By "replaced," you mean the old one was broken?

Author: Well, not broken exactly... The probability of it actually turning on when you hit the remote was about the same as a superweapon in an anime. And even if it miraculously started, it made a sound reminiscent of a propeller plane... But once you stopped it, there was no guarantee it would start again, so I was too scared to turn it off. It was just so noisy.

L: That means it was definitely broken. You should have replaced it a long time ago.

Author: Well, there were theories about that... But man, the new model is great! It starts when you press the button. It doesn't sound like a propeller plane. Plus, it has some weird new features I don't really understand.

L: I don't think the button or the sound are "new model vs old model" issues, but whatever. What are these "weird new features"?

Author: Hmm. The manual says "Ion Plasma Shield."

L: Wow... Just based on the name, it sounds like it could block beam attacks.

Author: Once it's mass-produced, the Federation will be no match for it! Or maybe it's a feature where air blasts out, allowing for independent atmospheric entry! In

fact, the manual doesn't say "cannot block beams" or "do not use during atmospheric entry"! I bet it can! (Note from manufacturer: It can't.) Anyway, now that I have this super-scientific equipment, being half a year out of season is no problem! Supermarkets sell tomatoes even in winter!

L: ...Is that how it works...?

Author: So, back to the point. This year's New Year's card is, as always, an original drawing by the author: **"Hanpen, Radish, and Chikuwa. Also, a Weird Woman."**

L: Wait! You made *them* the main characters!?

Author: Well, when I drew that, I really wanted to eat Oden.

L: Oh ho. Saying that, and calling me a "weird woman." So, you're looking for a fight with me? Is that the interpretation?

Author: Hmph! Take it however you like! I am not the man I once was! As long as I have this Ion Plasma Shield, half-hearted attacks won't work!

L: Attacks that aren't half-hearted... like a blunt object?

Author: Ehhh!? Wait, no, could you maybe use a beam or something the Ion Plasma Shield might actually block—

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

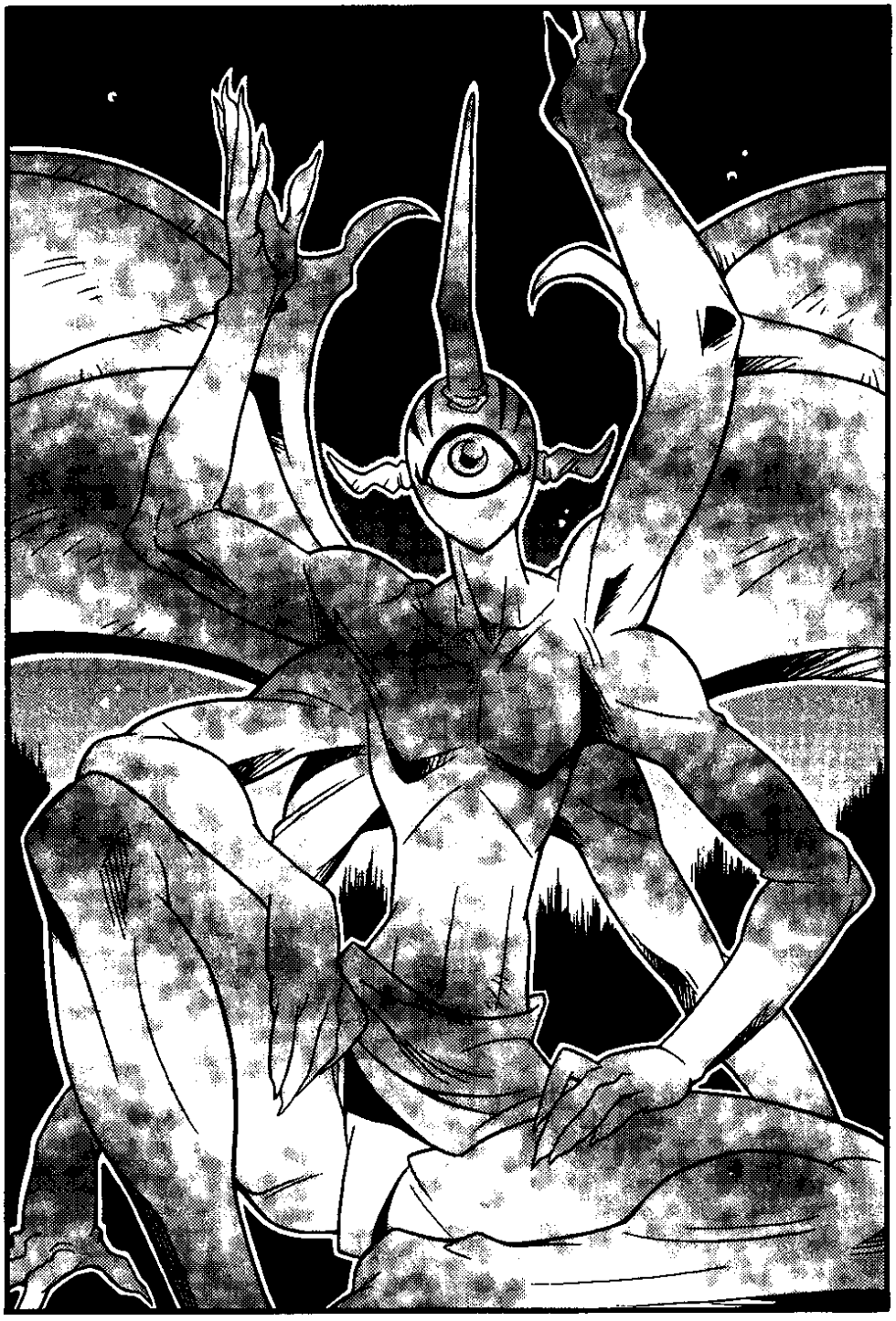
L: Oh. This ceramic mug has a new feature too. Hmph. Relying too much on the performance of your AC was your downfall.

Hero: Did she do it...!?

Female Mage: Yes...! It's our victory!

L: Ugh, you guys are still here!? Go away! Shoo! You're from a different world! ...Phew... Now then. Since the people from the other world left and the author is safely defeated. Once again. Let's see, this year's New Year's card is... (looks at drawing) ...Me eating Oden on the street? Hmm... there's no other way to interpret it... All the previous ones had some kind of punchline... The one in 2000 was me and Subordinate D + extras, the next year was... wait! Could this be!? 2000 was the Year of the Dragon, me and Subordinate D's dragon version. The next year, me with a heavy spiked hammer. And this year, me eating Oden... could... could it be...! No... surely not... and even if it were, I could never say it out loud... ..... Oh well. Now that I've reached a personal realization while leaving the readers completely behind... I'll end it here~

(Wait, hey!)



ラギアソーンが描き出したソレは
なんともいえぬ姿であった――。